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RESEARCH ARTICLE

"*Very* Female, with the Allure of a Foreign Aura": Vocality, Gender, and European Exoticism in the US Careers of Alice Babs and Caterina Valente

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Abstract

"How can America import 'American' jazz?," asked the music editor of *Good Housekeeping*, George Marek, in 1956. Marek answered, "Singers, particularly if they are very female, give the home-grown music the allure of a foreign aura." Taking these statements as a starting point, this article gives an account of the US careers of Alice Babs and Caterina Valente. Gender, class, and ethnicity were key elements in the US construction of Babs's and Valente's musical personae, which was especially heard in their vocality, with an emphasis on high-pitched vocal stylings, melismas, and "white" timbres to signify gender and European exoticism. The US careers of Babs and Valente show us that musical Americanness or Europeanness are not created separately on either side of the Atlantic. Their European identities were not created in Europe and then imported to the United States but were created in the process of transmission into the United States. Importantly, the article argues that race and ethnicity were used by musicians, critics, and listeners to position Babs and Valente as Europeans. Their whiteness was transposed in a US context and their stories tell us as much about US ideologies of whiteness as it does about European ethnicities.

In the August 1956 issue of the magazine *Good Housekeeping*, music editor George Marek asked, "How can America import 'American' jazz? It's American with a foreign flavor—and it just suits our taste."[1] He opens by presenting a "time-encrusted," old Europe in contrast with an implicitly modern United States and continues:

> A fine state of affairs! Has tin-pan alley become a street around the world?
>
> When you go to France you hear, instead of the songs of old Provence, American tunes translated into a French that rhymes *l'amour* with *toujours*. In a way that's a tribute to our pop music; there is something about it that appeals internationally. Slick and sleek, jaunty and easy, the tunes fit whether you wear a hat, a beret, or a sombrero.
>
> But that matter goes even further. The American product is being manufactured abroad. The singers and the band leaders of Europe, the German jazz musicians and the French *chanteuses*, are taking our tunes (or tunes very much like ours), singing them and playing them in American style, and then exporting them back here. And with excellent success!
>
> Many American songs recorded in Europe have become hits *here*. European stars are offering competition to our own pop-music stars. . . .
>
> But even more than the pop song or the dance tune, Europe has appropriated jazz as an enthusiasm. As a new art form, jazz was taken seriously in Europe, particularly in France, long before our pundits glanced at it. As entertainment, it seems to suit the youngsters of Scandinavia, England, Holland, and France. It is less popular in Italy. It is extraordinarily popular in Germany, where it's almost as much at home in West Berlin as in Berlin, New Jersey. . . .

[1]George Marek, "Over There, Over Here," *Good Housekeeping*, August 1956, 32 and 198.

> We may debate whether this universal Americanization is a good thing for music. The whole world seems to be wearing the same hat. Won't that lead to a weakening of individuality? Obviously part of this standardization stems not from artistic but financial causes. This is the biggest record market in the world, and songs are sung and jazz music is recorded without the thought, Will it sell in the U.S.A.?[2]

We notice a number of well-known tropes from the US reception of European culture and jazz. Marek repeats the narrative that Europeans took jazz seriously before US-Americans. This elevation of European aesthetic attitudes extends to the artists, as Marek affords Europeans more creative agency. By contrast, US music is "slick and sleek, jaunty and easy" and its culture has universal appeal. This image of US music is tied to commodification, as it is described as a "product" that is "manufactured." Marek speculates that this standardization of US music is the result of financial, not artistic, concerns, thus positioning European musicians as (willing) victims of US capitalism. This uniformity of US culture is also marked by the fact that almost all of the musicians Marek mentions are white (although he does not make this explicit), with the foreigners as unproblematic appropriators of Black styles, who only have to compete with white US-Americans when imported to the United States.[3]

Marek's article gives a picture of the ambiguous yet cheerful attitude with which European jazz and popular music was greeted within the United States in the 1950s.[4] The article does, however, not specify where one might get a taste of this foreignness. The closest we get to an indication of what might distinguish European performers is Marek's gendered description of vocalists: "Singers, particularly if they are *very* female, give the home-grown music the allure of a foreign aura."[5]

In this article, I focus on two of the singers Marek highlights, Alice Babs and Caterina Valente. Babs started her career as a Swedish teen star blending jazz and European yodeling. Later, she changed her singing style to a more "classical" soprano-sound and ended as a featured soloist for Edward Kennedy "Duke" Ellington, where her "pure" timbre signified gender, European highbrow culture, and whiteness. Valente, a French singer with Italian roots who started her career in Germany, was presented as a cosmopolitan figure who could easily sing in a plethora of languages and styles. US critics marveled at her versatile soprano voice which embodied a whiteness and femininity that could appropriate several ethnicities. I proceed by giving an account of the breakthroughs and US careers of first Babs and then Valente, before returning to Babs's work with Duke Ellington and Valente's last work in the United States in the 1960s.

I do not take what Marek called "aura" to be an essence of difference, foreignness, Europeanness, whiteness, or femininity.[6] Rather, I approach it as a point in what Stuart Hall calls *positioning*, emphasizing the production of cultural identity.[7] Following Hall, I argue that the production of Babs's and Valente's cultural identities "was not, and could not be, made directly, without

[2]Marek, "Over There, Over Here," 32 and 198. Marek's italics.

[3]Marek's white framework in combination with his distinctions of transatlantic cultural capital reflected *Good Housekeeping*'s readership of women from the growing US middle class. Randal Doane, "Bourdieu, Cultural Intermediaries and *Good Housekeeping*'s George Marek: A Case Study of Middlebrow Musical Taste," *Journal of Consumer Culture* 9, no. 2 (2009): 155–86.

[4]Although it is true that there was growth in the number of foreign musicians on the US charts in the sixties, this does not mean that US popular music culture was unaware of any foreign music until the so-called British Invasion in 1964. Indeed, as William L. Schurk, B. Lee Cooper, and Julie A. Cooper have shown in a discographical study of *Billboard* charts, "the global intrusion into the American pop charts was both undeniable and influential" before the Beatles and their compatriots became popular in the United States. The majority of this pre-invasion intrusion came from Europe and Canada. Schurk, Cooper, and Cooper, "Before the Beatles: International Influences on American Popular Recordings, 1940–63," *Popular Music and Society* 30, no. 2 (2007): 230. There was also a growth in the US distribution and consumption of European film in this period. Tino Balio, *The Foreign Film Renaissance on American Screens, 1946–1973* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2010).

[5]Marek, "Over There, Over Here." Marek's italics.

[6]Nor do I, or Marek, use the term "aura" here in the sense theorized by Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *Selected Writings* 3, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 101–33.

[7]Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, ed. Jonathan Rutherford (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 222–37.

'mediation.'"[8] I want to highlight the ways in which Babs's and Valente's US positioning as European women was, to paraphrase Hall, "not [about] the so-called return to roots but a coming-to-terms with [their] 'routes.'"[9] The formation of specifically gendered and European identities was mediated by transatlantic routes.

This positioning happened through a *musical persona*, encompassing, as Philip Auslander theorizes it, the real person (the performer as an individual), the performance persona (the performer as a social being), and the song character (the role the performer plays in a specific song/work).[10] My analysis shows how Babs's and Valente's real personae as Europeans and women was blended with their performance personae using musical elements that marked Europeanness and gender, and sometimes individual song characters through lyrics, vocal performance, and arrangements.

Babs and Valente formed these personae in the changing musical world of the 1950s and 1960s and fulfilled stereotypical expectations of easy listening, middle-of-the-road popular music of the period.[11] This music may mainly have been consumed by the heteronormative white US middle class; and it may seem that the "light" sound and stylistic heterogeneity of female singers like Babs and Valente is the sound of something aesthetically lightweight. However, as Albin Zak has argued in his account of the music of the 1950s: "The new sounds pointed in no particular direction, yet, paradoxically, it was the era's unfocused meandering that fuelled its revolutionary thrust."[12] Simultaneously to canonically revolutionary musical developments like rock 'n' roll and free jazz, Babs and Valente provided the soundtrack to the mid-century expansion of the middle class.

Additionally, even as Babs and Valente were successful pop singers, they were also jazz singers. Though jazz has an unmistakable US identity, its hybrid nature has from the beginning invited global interpretations.[13] With Babs and Valente we hear that transnational hybridity being imported back to the United States. Furthermore, as feminist interventions in jazz studies have highlighted, the politics of jazz is such that vocal music, female musicians, and music that lies at the intersection of jazz and pop gets marginalized and sometimes even denigrated.[14] Jazz has a masculine bias, both in scholarship and journalistic narratives, but in the broader context of popular music around 1960 Jacqueline Warwick has also warned us that "if our histories of the period valorize the activities of boys and men, they also valorize the aesthetic priorities of popular music associated with maleness."[15]

[8]Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," 231. Although I do not draw upon it explicitly, another fruitful way of framing these case studies comes from Bourdieu's theories of cultural production, which shares the term "positioning" with Hall. Bourdieu's writings supplement Hall particularly as regards the class-positioning of higher symbolic capital that Europeanness holds in the United States that was also associated with Valente and, especially, Babs. This is related to the US middle-class consumption of Babs and Valente, in that the symbolic capital of Europeanness was used in a display of middlebrow cultural capital. (Bourdieu, however, does not account well for popular culture, its mass-produced products, and the power of the twentieth century culture industry, for which one finds a better explanation in Hall and kindred Birmingham School writers.) See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity, 1993); and *Distinction* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984).

[9]Stuart Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs 'Identity'?" in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, ed. Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 4.

[10]Philip Auslander, "Performance Analysis and Popular Music: A Manifesto," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 14, no. 1 (2004): 1–13; Philip Auslander, "Musical Personae," *Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2006): 100–19. Auslander is building upon, among others, Simon Frith, *Performing Rites: On Value in Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 183–225. Musical personae are not only mediated through music but takes place across multiple media. See Kai Arne Hansen, "(Re)Reading the Pop Personae: A Transmedial Approach to Studying the Multiple Construction of Artist Identities," *Twentieth-Century Music* 16, no. 3 (2019): 501–29.

[11]I discuss the particulars of this music below, but a good overview is found in Keir Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows: Defining the Easy Listening Era, 1946–1966," *American Music* 26, no. 3 (2008): 309–35.

[12]Albin Zak, *I Don't Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), 7.

[13]E. Taylor Atkins, "Toward a Global History of Jazz," in *Jazz Planet*, ed. E. Taylor Atkins (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003), xi–xxvii; Bruce Johnson, *Jazz Diaspora: Music and Globalisation* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

[14]Vickie Willis summarizes the discourse of jazz as one where "singers are not 'real' musicians, and women are largely ignored." "Be-in-tween the Spa[ ]ces: The Location of Women and Subversion in Jazz," *Journal of American Culture* 31, no. 3 (2008): 294. See also Lara Pellegrinelli, "Separated at 'Birth': Singing and the History of Jazz," in *Big Ears: Listening for Gender in Jazz Studies*, ed. Nicole T. Rushtin and Sherrie Tucker, (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 31–47.

[15]Jacqueline Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture: Popular Music and Identity in the 1960s* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 6.

This article heeds these words and engages with the "very female" sounds of Babs and Valente that might otherwise easily be trivialized as middle-of-the-road pop and non-jazz.

Babs's and Valente's gender and vocality became main elements in their personae in the United States.[16] My research here builds upon recent scholarship that seeks to theorize the voice anew.[17] My attention to the US reception of these European voices is not merely of historiographical interest, but is also a methodological move that follows Nina Sun Eidsheim's insistence that "voice is not innate; it is cultural" and that "the voice does not arise solely from the vocalizer; it is created just as much within the process of listening."[18] The following contains analyses of Babs's and Valente's vocal performance but does not conclude that there is a vocal formalism of European singing. My focus on reception history is meant to uncover some of the ways the encounter between European singers and US listeners shaped the voices of Babs and Valente.

Babs's and Valente's female personae and vocality was positioned in conjunction with their ethnicities. This article joins the growing critical study of whiteness in music studies to include considerations of race and how the ethnicity of these European singers played into their US reception. A hallmark of Babs's and Valente's singing was their high-pitched voices and clear timbres, which historically have been coded as white in contrast to the lower-pitched, "darker" timbres found to be the essential characteristics of Black voices.[19] This vocal style was combined with exoticizing musical elements signifying Europeanness. Although "European," these tropes function similar to the orientalist markers of otherness that Susan McClary has called "fetishized pitches" (e.g., lowered sevenths, raised fourths).[20] In the case of Babs and Valente, we might thus even talk about fetishized pitch, because their vocal performances used such fetishized pitches but also because their voices were fetishized for their high pitch.

As Grant Olwage writes, "the voice assumes its vocal identity, its sonic and therefore social identity, from the aesthetics of musical pleasure in which it is embedded. . . . So, instead of the color of the voice, we might speak about the color of the ear."[21] Thus, we must go beyond Babs's and Valente's voices as such and explore US desires for a particular kind of voice—the color of the US ear—that produced a conception of a feminized and exoticized European, foreign aura.[22] Their forays into US jazz and pop were not only an appropriation of Black music—in fact they rarely engaged in what Matthew Morrison has termed *blacksound* (i.e., sonic blackface[23])—but was just as much the construction of a white, European otherness, which is not directly equivalent to any white US sound but is doubly marked

[16]On vocality as an element in personae, see Nicola Dibben, "Vocal Performance and the Projection of Emotional Authenticity," in *The Ashgate Companion to Popular Musicology*, ed. Derek Scott (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009), 317–33; Serge Lacasse, "The Phonographic Voice: Paralinguistic Features and Phonographic Staging in Popular Music Singing," in *Recorded Music: Performance, Culture, Technology*, ed. Amanda Bayley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 225–51; and Allan Moore, *Song Means: Analysing and Interpreting Popular Recorded Song* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 179–214.

[17]Some of these trends are summarized by Martha Feldman in her introduction to "Why Voice Now?" colloquy, ed. Martha Feldman, *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 68, no. 3 (2015): 653–85; and Nina Sun Eidsheim and Katherine Meizel, *The Oxford Handbook of Voice Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).

[18]Nina Sun Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound: Listening, Timbre & Vocality in African American Music* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 11.

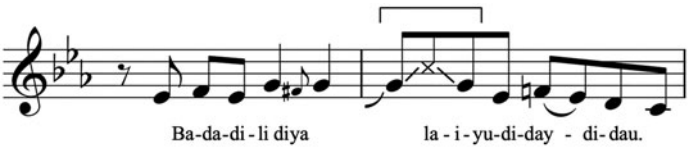
[19]Jennifer Lind Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line: Race and the Cultural Politics of Listening* (New York: New York University Press, 2016), 78–131; Laurie Stras, "White Face, Black Voice: Race, Gender, and Region in the Music of the Boswell Sisters," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 1, no. 2 (2007): 207–55.

[20]Susan McClary, *Georges Bizet: Carmen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 54.

[21]Grant Olwage, "The Class and Colour of Tone: An Essay on the Social History of Vocal Timbre," *Ethnomusicology Forum* 13, no. 2 (2004): 216–15.

[22]I follow Ralph Locke and stress that though exoticism is a musical technique of cultural representation that may work through essentialism, it is unproductive to define it in essentialist terms for the purpose of analysis. Rather, it is fundamentally relational, historically contingent, reception-based, and cannot be captured in definitions of musical formalism. It must be viewed in what Locke calls the "all the music in full context" paradigm, in *Musical Exoticism: Images and Reflections* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 59.

[23]Matthew D. Morrison, "The Sound(s) of Subjection: Constructing American Popular Music and Racial Identity through Blacksound," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 27, no. 1 (2017): 13–24. See also Daphne A. Brooks, "'This Voice Which Is Not One': Amy Winehouse Sings the Ballad of Sonic Blue(s)face Culture," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 20, no. 1 (2010): 37–60.



Example 1. Babs's scatting and yodeling in the bridge of "Jag har en liten Radiola" at 1:13. The yodel is marked with a bracket.

as not African American and not American. Yet, Babs's and Valente's racial position was still elided with US whiteness. Marek's failure to name the whiteness he linked with the vocal "aura" of Babs and Valente exemplifies the observation that whiteness often appears, in white society, as an unmarked marker.[24] However, as other whiteness scholars have pointed out, whiteness only remains invisible to those who inhabit it.[25] In this case, Marek's commentary reveals how European ethnicities were positioned as forms of otherness interior to whiteness. Babs's and Valente's position as Europeans was marked as a difference from US musicians, but the whiteness they shared with hegemonic US culture was what made their appropriation of jazz and US popular music acceptable. Showing how the production of ethnic difference is accompanied by shared racial markers, this article echoes studies of musical difference which have emphasized the sameness that is also central to transnational music.[26] Through this analysis of race, ethnicity, and difference, we come to see that musical whiteness is in fact rarely unmarked, but functions through a series of racialized musical tropes and ways of listening for race.

The Swedish Yodel Girl Goes to the United States

Alice Babs (1924–2014) began her career as a teen idol in Sweden where one of her defining characteristics became her yodeling: her very first recording codified her early performance persona "Joddlarflickan" ("The Yodel Girl," 1939), but she also mixed the style into her broader repertoire.

A song created as advert for a radio set, "Jag har en liten Radiola" ("I Have a Little Radiola," 1939), gives us an example of how she inserted, mixed, and conflated African American jazz style with yodeling[27]:

> From the Negroes of Harlem, I hear:
> [Scat:] Ba-da-di-li-ya-la-i-yu-di-day-di-dau,
> And London adds, *yes sir*,
> A little *spleen*,
> I have a little Radiola,
> And it means everything to me,
> A catch from Vienna to Berlin,
> And from Paris to Tunis,
> And back to you![28]

Babs's vocal acrobatics could be heard as a version of African American singing, but she also inserts a yodel-hiccup in the middle of her scatting (Example 1), which more obviously connoted sounds of

[24]Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

[25]This critique goes as far back as, at least, W. E. B. Du Bois, "The Souls of White Folk," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to Be White*, ed. David Roediger (New York: Schocken, 1999 [1920]), 184–99; and more recently, Sara Ahmed, "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," *Borderlands E-Journal* 3, no. 2 (2004); and George Yancy, *Look, a White* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2012).

[26]Olivia Bloechl with Melanie Lowe, "Introduction: Rethinking Difference," in *Rethinking Difference in Music Scholarship*, ed. Olivia Bloechl, Melanie Lowe, and Jeffrey Kallberg (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 4.

[27]A formal definition of yodeling is difficult. Here, I use the term in its widest sense, meaning an oscillation of tones, often between different registers with the use of a vocal break. Even so, as Timothy Wise notes, thinking of it in terms of "register" can also be problematic especially regarding a soprano singer, like Babs, who sings a lot exclusively in "head voice." Following Wise, the important thing is that the yodel is a point of sonic difference, a musical event he calls the *yodeleme*. Wise, "Yodel Species: A Typology of Falsetto Effects in Popular Music Vocal Styles," *Radical Musicology* 2 (2007): n.p.

[28]All translations from the Swedish are the author's. The words in italics are in English in the original.

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the Swiss and Austrian Alps and thus offered Swedish listeners a more familiar exoticism as shorthand for musical difference. The yodel-hiccup is doubly marked, as it is situated in a phrase that features a play around the regular, major third that gestures towards the blue third (in my transcription marked as a F# grace note and a scoop up to the G, indicating a blues inflection). African American style (i.e., scatting and blue notes) is mediated and assimilated into a European context via yodeling. As the cultural historian Johan Fornäs has argued, this opening towards US culture works through the transposition of blackness onto other ethnic differences in Sweden.[29]

During the 1940s and 1950s Babs expanded her range, musically—three and a half octaves—and geographically, beyond Sweden, making a name for herself in Scandinavia and then in Europe (most significantly as a schlager singer in Germany where she had success with several yodel-themed recordings). So, by the late 1950s she was looking across the Atlantic.

In 1957 she went to New York, which she later described as a "culture shock."[30] She recounts being skeptical of US managers and refers to one of them, using the US-American word, as a "gangster type."[31] During her visits the following years these impressions continued, with an image of the United States formed by US popular culture, the service industry, and consumer products. The emphasis on standardization leads her to imply a dichotomy between the United States and a more artistically minded Europe. For example, she describes how she and guitarist Ulrik Neumann had to fight to amend their second (and otherwise identical) set at Los Angeles's Coconut Grove to include their version of a Bach fugue.[32] She finds the US music industry more exploitative than the European, describing how (too) many people in the United States demand a cut of the artists' wages: "The insight I got to get into American performing-life during my three years in the United States completely saved me from dreams of America! I praised my lucky star that I was Swedish and a European."[33]

In 1959, Babs partnered up with Neuman and violinist Svend Asmussen to form The Swe-Danes (a portmanteau of their nationalities) and returned to the Coconut Grove (and later Minneapolis and Chicago; examples of US ads for the band appear in Figure 1). The initial response from the *Los Angeles Times* was, however, that they "seemed better suited to some other place than this home of sophisticated entertainment," and that "the act needs brighter material." Apparently, the "Yodel Cha Cha" Babs performed was not bright enough.[34] Still, they ended up with considerable success, and it is a bit ironic that the same newspaper described what was ostensibly the same show next year as "bright."[35]

If one listens to their hits, like "Scandinavian Shuffle" (the title track of their 1960 album), one gets a sense of how this perceived brightness was directly tied to their vocal performance, with the *Minneapolis Star* describing them as having "refined scat singing to a modernistic degree, voicing syllables in close harmony, and using this technique to imitate instruments and to blend vocal and instrumental harmony." In this, the paper wrote, "the Swe-Danes do European things to American tunes and American things to European tunes."[36] This transatlantic mix was a result of the repertoire (which included jazz standards, "O sole mio," and yodeling), but central to the Swe-Danes' style was Babs's

[29]Johan Fornäs, "Swinging Differences: Reconstructed Identities in the Early Swedish Jazz Age," in *Jazz Planet*, ed. E. Taylor Atkins (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2003), 213–14. For Fornäs's wider narrative of Swedish jazz, see *Moderna människor: Jazzen och folkhemmet* (Stockholm: Norstedts förlag, 2004) and "Exclusion, Polarization, Hybridization, Assimilation: Otherness and Modernity in the Swedish Jazz Age," *Popular Music and Society* 33, no. 2 (2010): 219–36.

[30]Alice Babs, *Född till musik* (Stockholm: Norstedts, 1989), 311.

[31]Babs, *Född till musik*, 309. Interestingly enough some of these tropes also show up in Valente's memoirs, including the gangster figure.

[32]Babs, *Född till musik*, 323. The question of repertoire is, in this case, an issue presented as a problem that otherwise could become a strength, and certainly became one for the Swe-Danes. Contrary to this anecdote, *Down Beat*'s review of their album points to Neumann's classical training as the most important aspect of his style; J.A.T. (pseud.), Music in Review column, *Down Beat*, November 27, 1958, 23. As part of a mid-century category of easy listening music, Keir Keightley suggests that "these 'classical' appropriations contributed to a sense of 'classiness' and bourgeois luxury that meshed neatly with both the populist consumer promises of an 'easy' life and the middlebrow sensibilities of the period." Keightley, "Music for Middlebrows," 317.

[33]"Den inblicken jag hann att få i amerikanskt artistliv under mina tre år i USA frälste mig helt från Amerikadrömmar! Jag prisade min lyckliga stjärna att jag var svensk og europé." Babs, *Född till musik*, 324.

[34]"Scandinavians Team at Grove," *Los Angeles Times*, October 3, 1959.

[35]"Night Life Scene: Shawn, Newhart Fracture Clubbers," *Los Angeles Times*, October 15, 1960.

[36]Bob Murphy, "Swe-Danes—Ingenuity in a Scandinavian Way," *Minneapolis Star*, November 1, 1960.

Figure 1. American newspaper ads for The Swe-Danes. Notice the ad placed in the middle here, from the Minneapolis Star, October 20, 1960, which pitches the band to the Scandinavian-Americans in the region with a Scandinavian festival and the Scandinavian word for "hello," goddag.

high-soaring, clear-toned soprano that blended classical singing, yodeling, and instrument-imitation in Asmussen's arrangements. Her voice still presented a "diversifying hybridity," to use Fornäs's term,[37] but it was—to use Marek's contemporary characteristics—more "slick and sleek" than previously, secured by the virtuosity of the music and her increased vocal range. The repertoire was "bright," which worked as a synonym for easy listening, though perhaps extending its connotations to a white, middle-class, female identity that Babs embodied and represented with her vocal timbre.

"A Perfect Antidote to Acute Hipsterism": Alice Babs Sings for the Middle Class

From the mid-1950s, Babs tried to downplay yodel-singing. Her exotic folkloricism, timbre, and preference for higher pitches was characterized by an increasing use of open vowels, sometimes in recordings aided by studio manipulation in what Serge Lacasse calls *vocal staging*.[38] This is most evident in an album she made with Svend Asmussen, *Scandinavian Folk Songs Sung & Swung!* (1964), which was produced in a special release by Philips for the US market. Aiming at an international, Anglo American audience, the album contains English-language versions of Nordic folk songs. The songs are jolly representations of an imagined pastoral past and melancholic ballads representing the cold climate and wide spaces of the Scandinavian landscape, creating a Nordic exoticism.[39] Babs utilized her incredible range (sounding relaxed and comfortable around C6) to signify high-spirited folk idyll or tall peaks in the landscape. For example, on the tune "Blue Mountain Land," the mix amplifies this sonic image by adding an astonishing amount of echo and reverb to her voice (Example 2). This combination of reverb and high pitch is a musical othering common in mid-century exotica, described by Peter Doyle as a *double remove*, where "the sound is 'laterally' removed by the reverb and then

[37]Fornäs, "Swinging Differences," 228.

[38]Lacasse, "The Phonographic Voice."

[39]Even if Babs and Asmussen are representing their own Scandinavian homeland(s) and engaging in a form of nationalism/regionalism, they are doing so in a highly stylized manner for an intended audience from abroad and thus, as Locke argues, "in the broader cosmopolis, they function (instead or as well) as an exotic product." Locke, *Musical Exoticism*, 77.

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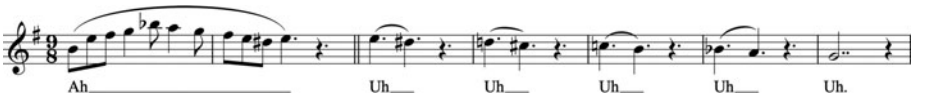
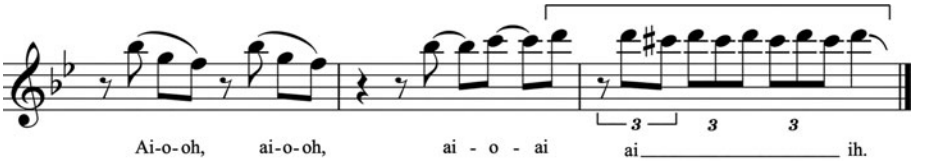


Example 2. Babs's vocals in the outro of "Blue Mountain Land" at 2:38. Her voice has reverb added and is placed further back in the sound box than during the performance of the song itself. Sung in unison with strings that glissando, close-miked, up to the beginning notes of the chromatic sigh-motifs after the double barline.



Example 3. Babs's final cadenza from "I'm Sitting on the Top of the World" from The Dinah Shore Chevy Show, February 5, 1961. "Yodel" marked with brackets.

'lifted' off the ground into the ethereal realm."[40] It also uses what Rebecca Leydon has called a *soft-focus sound*, which feminizes her voice through the excessive reverb and marks her as embodying a persona of fantastical, faerie-like Nordic femininity.[41]

Even if she had tried to minimize it, another part of her Nordic exoticism was her continued use of yodel-motifs. Appearing on *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show* in 1961, Babs distinguishes herself from the program host, Dinah Shore, by ending their duet performance in a high-pitched cadenza (arguably yodel-inspired) that had become her trademark of timbre and vocal virtuosity (Example 3).[42]

Shore's persona was the embodiment of the 1950s ideal of a middle-class all-American woman. Babs was mirrored in this image, but unlike Shore's appearance, which had been physically (through plastic surgery) and culturally altered from Jewish, bluesy jazz singer to white entertainer,[43] Babs was still positioned in a persona that accentuated her ethnicity with the folk-inflected crocheted dress that points to a regional identity (in fact the same dress she had worn when representing Sweden in the Eurovision Song Contest; see Figure 2). Similar to the "neutral Americanness" that Shore presented,[44] Babs offered a white, if exotic, Europeanness that could remind US listeners and viewers of the old country of white, ethnic safety while serving as a postcard for the US middle-class tourist, who dreams of visiting a Europe that is both historical and folkloric, but also modern and fashionable.[45] This US

[40]Peter Doyle, *Echo and Reverb: Fabricating Space in Popular Music Recording, 1900–1960* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2005), 133; on the uses of echo and reverb in 1950s music, see also Zak, *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*, 153–64. See also William Moylan, "Considering Space in Recorded Music," in *The Art of Record Production*, ed. Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 163–88; and Paul Théberge, "The Sound of Nowhere: Reverb and the Construction of Sonic Space," in *The Relentless Pursuit of Tone: Timbre in Popular Music*, ed. Robert Fink, Melinda Latour, and Zachary Wallmark (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 323–344.

[41]Rebecca Leydon, "The Soft-Focus Sound: Reverb as a Gendered Attribute in Mid-Century Mood Music," *Perspectives of New Music* 39, no. 2 (2001): 96–107. This sound may also have racial connotations, as shown in Grant Olwage's study of the "continuum of Victorian vocal sound, where at the one end—the 'right,' white end—soft-singing taught and indexed good, pure tone, the shout of the black voice placed at the other end." Olwage, "The Class and Colour of Tone," 212.

[42]*The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*, "From Beautiful Copenhagen," aired February 5, 1961, NBC, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QlP8Fl4VMVw, at 0:23. Babs is not literally, technically speaking yodeling here, or in the subsequent examples I give. Yet, I argue that given Babs's history as a yodel-singer, this is what Timothy Wise calls "stylized yodeling," which retains its signifying power as a *yodeleme*. Wise, "Yodel Species."

[43]Shore had plastic surgery performed on her nose and dyed her hair blond, which helped her transform into an All-American star and enabled her to subvert her perceived Jewish appearance. This was accompanied with a change in repertoire and style, from the African American inflected blues and popular music with "Schmaltz" to a "cleaner" style in the pop and mainstream jazz repertoire. Lola Clare Bratten, "Nothin' Could Be Finah: *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*," in *Small Screens, Big Ideas: Television in the 1950s*, ed. Janet Thumim (London & New York: I. B. Thaurus, 2002), 88–104.

[44]Bratten, "Nothin' Could Be Finah," 95.

[45]Christopher Endy has argued that the post-war rise of US tourism in Europe not only stemmed from increased middle-class prosperity, but also required, among other things, the cultural mediation and promotion of transatlantic cultural exchange, which paradoxically also saw the entrenching of national identity. His study shows how this included the representation of France (but

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Figure 2. Babs on The Dinah Shore Chevy Show, February 5, 1961.

fascination with Scandinavians goes as far back as, at least, Emerson, who located the ancestral home of whiteness and Anglo-Saxon identity in the region.[46] Well into the mid-twentieth century "Nordic" continued to be used as a term to draw a racial colorline between white Europeans from northern Europe (including Anglo-Saxons and the Irish) and the southern "Mediterranean" race.[47]

This white, middle-class Scandinavianness is clearest in Babs's and Neumann's first US release, *When the Children Are Asleep* (1958; before they teamed up with Asmussen to form Swe-Danes), distributed by the Hollywood-based pop label Dot Records (owned by Paramount). The repertoire emphasized middle-class coupledom with tunes like the title track, as well as "Two Sleepy People," "Home with You," and "Let's Put Out the Lights" played in intimate (but not erotic) duet arrangements. This album was marketed as "adult-oriented" jazz-pop with a selection of standards that exemplify the age-format stratification in the political economy of music in the 1950s. Furthermore, it was an LP, which carried a higher symbolic capital into its middlebrow context.[48]

The album iconography (Figure 3) shows Babs and Neumann in front of the fireplace in a well-decorated living room, depicting them as idealized spouses, intentionally exploiting the song characters of the romantic repertoire to create the performance personae of a married couple (Babs and Neumann were not a "real" couple); the liner notes declare that "even married people can be in love" and suggests listening to the record when the children are asleep.[49] This iconography draws attention to an imagined listening experience placed in a domestic space, which is paired with the new LP format, middlebrow culture, and a middle-class social setting.[50] In her early career in

this fits equally with the representations of Scandinavia on *The Dinah Shore Chevy Show*) as a place of antimodern Old-World nostalgia and timeless civilization that was advertised as a destination for "sober" middle-class travel (or dreams of travelling). Endy, *Cold War Holidays: American Tourism in France* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 100–124.

[46]Nell Irvin Painter, "Ralph Waldo Emerson's Saxons," *Journal of American History* 95, no. 4 (2009): 977–85.

[47]Nell Irvin Painter, *The History of White People* (New York: Norton, 2010), 301–26.

[48]Keir Keightley, "Long Play: Adult-Oriented Popular Music and the Temporal Logics of Post-War Sound Recording Industry in the USA," *Media, Culture & Society* 26, no. 3 (2004): 375–91; Keir Keightley, "You Keep Coming Back Like A Song: Adult Audiences, Taste Panics, and the Idea of the Standard," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 13, no. 1 (2001): 7–40.

[49]Liner notes for Alice Babs and Ulrik Neumann, *When the Children Are Asleep*, Dot Records, DLP 3128 (1958). *Down Beat* simply assumed them to be a "Swedish husband-and-wife team," which they were not. J.A.T. (pseud.), Music in Review column, 23.

[50]Records like these are exceptions to the rule of the gendering of domestic sound systems, especially hi-fi, as mediators of masculine (middle-class) space in the postwar period. Especially evident in *When the Children Are Asleep*, the records and sound reproduction systems function as a mediator of *togetherness* with the recording technology placed in the common living room, as opposed to the "man-cave" alongside *Playboy* magazines and whiskey. See Keir Keightley, "'Turn It Down!' She Shrieked: Gender, Domestic Space, and High Fidelity, 1948–59," *Popular Music* 15, no. 2 (1996): 149–77. On the use of jazz and hi-fi systems in the creation of the postwar, middle-class living room as a social space, see Tom Perchard, "Mid-century Modern Jazz: Music and Design in the Postwar Home," *Popular Music* 36, no. 1 (2017): 55–74.

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Figure 3. Album cover for Alice Babs and Ulrik Neumann, *When the Children Are Asleep* (1958).

Sweden, Babs was at the vanguard of musical modernity and cultural hybridity, but as she grew older and travelled across the Atlantic her positioning changed. No longer a teen idol, her age, ethnicity, race, and musical style instead placed her at the vanguard of adult-oriented jazz and pop marketed to the growing white middle class. As *Down Beat* concluded in the review of *When the Children Are Asleep*: "Recommended as a perfect antidote to acute hipsterism."[51]

From Istanbul (not Constantinople) to Malaga: Caterina Valente's Exoticism

Caterina Valente's (1931–) biography was central to her image from the very beginning of her career. Her multilingual abilities and range of musical styles came to define her as a cosmopolitan persona. In marketing and in the press Valente's multinational identity—from an ethnically Italian family of performers, speaking with a French accent, and holding a German passport—was paired with her upbringing "on the stage," which was exotic compared to her image as a German *Mädchen* (girl) and later as a middle-class mother. One of the only scholarly studies of Valente summarizes her as "'the German world-star,' characterized through the attractive blend and harmonization of numerous contradictions and opposites."[52] These dialectics of harmonization and contradiction, of Germany and

[51]J.A.T. (pseud.), Music in Review column, 23.

[52]"Caterina Valente: 'der deutsche Weltstar,' charackterisiert durch die attractive Vermischung und Harmonisierung zahlreicher Widersprüche und Gegensätze." Ricarda Strobel and Werner Faulstich, *Die deutschen Fernsehstars. Band 2: Show- und Gesangstars* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), 16.

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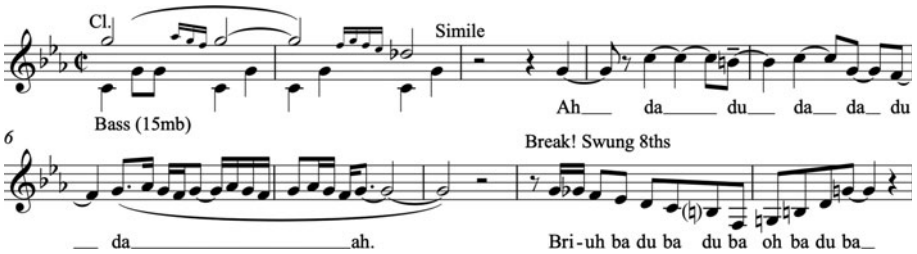

Example 4. Opening of "Istanbul." The instrumentation also includes (not transcribed here) trombones and muted trumpets playing sustained chords, as well as castanets (or a percussion instrument imitating castanets) playing on each beat.

the world, of the national and international played out in a career that saw Valente become a TV star on both sides of the Atlantic and in her repertoire of German schlagers, French chansons, and songs in Spanish, Italian, and other languages, plus a constant undercurrent of various Latin American styles (with occasional other folkloric, exotically tinged songs evoking other places and ethnicities) and swing music. This repertoire variety blended together in the persona of a *Cosmopolitan Lady* (the title of her 1959 album) and *The Greatest… In Any Language!* (1961).

Not all of the musical styles Valente inhabited held equal force in her US career (there was never a US market for her German schlager singing). The style that secured her a breakthrough in the United States and continued to figure as a marker of exotic difference was a broadly conceived Spanish or Latin American sound.[53] In doing so she participated in the mid-century highpoint for the exotic in popular music.[54]

The opening measures of Valente's first hit record in Germany serves as an example of her exotic cosmopolitanism (Example 4). Recorded in 1953 with Kurt Edelhagen and his band, "Istanbul (Not Constantinople)" is a novelty song (sung in English) that relies on orientalist tropes. The tune opens with a clarinet playing arabesques in a phrase that ends with an emphasis on the diminished second (D-flat). The clarinet (and a few measures later, Valente's voice) is the top part of what Rebecca Leydon identifies as a layered texture characteristic of musical exoticism of the period.[55] Below the clarinet is a sparse, stable rhythm section of bass ostinato and castanets, as well as sustained chords from trombones and muted trumpets, all creating an exotic setting.[56] This layered, instrumental texture is answered by a vocal cadenza with Valente's vocalise in three parts. First, a metrically offset phrasing that gives the sensation of half-tempo that contributes further to the multilayered groove. Second, her own arabesques mimicking the clarinet. Valente's arabesques then, thirdly, lead into a scat break where she and the band switch from rubato-like feel and straight eights to swing.

[53]I do not mean to suggest that Latin American and Spanish musical styles as such were foreign to jazz or US popular music. Nevertheless, such styles were distinguished from the mainstream. Even in jazz where Latin styles were not necessarily seen as kitsch, they were still marked as different from the genre-normative styles of swing and bebop. Christopher Washburne points out that Latin jazz—and I believe that this argument can, mutatis mutandis, be expanded to other styles and subgenres—is persistently pigeonholed in slots "reserved exclusively for the exotic, the novel, the lightweight, the not real jazz music." Washburne, "Latin Jazz, Afro-Latin Jazz, Afro-Cuban Jazz, Cubop, Caribbean Jazz, Jazz Latin, or Just… Jazz," in *Jazz/Not Jazz: The Music and Its Boundaries*, ed. David Ake, Charles Hiroshi Garrett, and Daniel Goldmark (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 90.

[54]Philip Hayward, "The Cocktail Shift: Aligning Musical Exotica," in *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music*, ed. Philip Hayward (Sydney: John Libbey, 1999), 1–18. On novelty and stylistic pluralism in the 1950s, including novel techniques of record production, see Zak, *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*, especially chap. 3.

[55]Rebecca Leydon, "Utopias of the Tropics: The Exotic Music of Les Baxter and Yma Sumac," in *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music*, ed. Philip Hayward (Sydney: John Libbey, 1999), 48–51.

[56]The recording's production may also gesture towards a jungle jazz style, itself an exoticist style of jazz. The style is especially associated with Duke Ellington. However, unlike the case of Ellington, where complex musical and social politics of race played into the formation and reception of the exotic jungle style, I see the gesture towards the jungle style here as a more straightforward case of musical exoticism, that is, the allusion of a far-away place or "other" via an exotic trope. For a discussion of Ellington's jungle style, see Jeffrey Magee, "Ellington's Afro-Modernist Music in the 1920s," in *The Cambridge Companion to Duke Ellington*, ed. Edward Green (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 89–93; and Kimberley Hannon Teal, "Beyond the Cotton Club: The Persistence of Duke Ellington's Jungle Style," *Jazz Perspectives* 6, nos. 1–2 (2012): 123–49.

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The combination of the arabesque and the scat singing is jarring in its juxtaposition. The free-flowing rhythmic delivery of the first phrase gives it a rubato feel. It also contains a polyrhythmic layering that (though not captured in transcription) gives the feeling of triple against duple time. These vocal elements all contribute to the exotic texture highlighted in the instrumental arrangement. Furthermore, while the first phrase does not reach the highest soprano range, its initial leap to the high-note of C5 is contrasted with the plunge towards the low-note on F3 in the scat-phrase. This follows the trope of lower pitches signifying black vocal styles. The juxtaposition is also alluring in its suggestion that the two styles of vocalizing are sides of the same coin. Similar to Babs's mix of yodeling and scat in "Jag har en liten Radiola," the introduction to "Istanbul" presents a convergence of a folk-like, and in this case orientalist, exoticism and African American scat singing.

In "Istanbul" the exoticism was confined to the lyrics and the music in the introduction (the rest of the recording is in a swing jazz style), but subsequently exotic styles became a staple of Valente's music. Her next two hits, which inaugurated her US career, were a full exercise in Spanish-themed sounds. "Malaguena" and "The Breeze and I" (recorded 1954, with Werner Müller's orchestra) again open with Valente's melismatic arabesques. Valente's exoticism illustrates Derek Scott's point that "musical Orientalism has never been overly concerned with establishing distinctions between Eastern cultures, and that an interchangeability of exotic signifiers proved to be commonplace rather than astonishing."[57] With "Malaguena" and "The Breeze and I," based on movements from the Cuban composer Ernesto Lecuona's *Suite Andalucía* (1933), Valente moves easily from the orientalist sounds of "Istanbul" to Spain, itself the site of various elisions of orientalist and exotic musical imaginations in European art music. The genealogy and performance of the songs, thus, reveal the transnational, exoticist repertoire that became central to Valente.[58] Many of her songs—including "Malaguena"—follow the template from "Istanbul" and stages Valente's high-soaring vocalises and arabesques, a vocal presentation common in exotica of the era.[59] They are often placed in introductions and middle sections, giving them both a marginal status against the normative pop and jazz singing in the verses and choruses, but also distinguishing them as musical moments that require special attention. Indeed, "The Breeze and I" stretches the introduction of the song to take up almost a full minute, and "Malaguena" achieves the same feat by orchestrating the verse as a minute-long introduction before the proper groove sets in for the refrain. In both cases there is an explosive array of brass hits, cymbal crashes, castanets, Spanish guitar, chromatic descents by flutes and strings, and of course Valente's vocalise above it all.

The Hi-Fi Nightingale: Caterina Valente's Voice and Image in the United States

In the United States, the record label Decca (partnered with the William Morris agency) marketed Valente as the "Malaguena girl," crafting a performance persona out of her song character (Figure 4). In 1955, she charted in *Cash Box* and placed in the *Down Beat* critics' polls 1955–1957 under the category "Female singer—new star."

The US press positioned her difference by stressing her artistic family background and nationality, as well as her singing and gender. One paper called her an "Italian feminine singer"[60] and another used the adjectives "slender, girlish" and dubbed her "the girl with the rollercoaster voice."[61] This image of a young girl was echoed the following year with a description that also emphasized her appropriation of Black music: "New pop singers influenced by some of the greatest Negro jazz singers today include: Caterina Valente, lean attractive ponytailed singer from Germany who learned American jazz style

[57]Derek Scott, *From the Erotic to the Demonic: On Critical Musicology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 158.

[58]Tim Taylor lists "The Breeze and I" as one of the main "exotica standards" of the 1950s. Taylor, "Korla Pandit and Musical Indianism," in *Widening the Horizon: Exoticism in Post-War Popular Music*, ed. Philip Hayward (Sydney: John Libbey, 1999), 31–32.

[59]Leydon, "Utopia in the Tropics."; John Haley, "A Re-evaluation of Yma Sumac Based on Live Recordings," *ARSC Journal* 43, no. 2 (2012): 163–95. Valente was indeed later compared to Sumac. John Scott, "New Star Shines in Las Vegas," *Los Angeles Times*, April 21, 1964.

[60]Wayne Oliver, "Star Flies 14,000 Miles for 10 Minutes on TV," *Los Angeles Times*, March 18, 1955.

[61]Mercer Cross, "'Smoke Filled Room' Is Laugh-Filled Record," *Minneapolis Morning Tribune*, October 6, 1957.

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Figure 4. Caterina Valente on cover of *Cash Box* (March 12, 1955) magazine as the "Malaguena girl."

from recordings by Louis Armstrong, Ethel Waters and Billie Holiday."[62] *Time* magazine even described her in racially ambiguous terms: "Her singing style has settled into a kind of modified Moorish that can develop into a frightening, savage howl or sink into a sweet whisper."[63] The two

[62]George Daniels, "Fats Domino Mr. Hit Maker," Curtain Time, *Daily Defender*, November 19, 1956.
[63]"New Pop Singers," *Time*, November 19, 1956, 53.

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Figure 5. Front cover of *The Hi-Fi Nightingale* (1956).

sides of Valente's voice were racially coded, with the savage howling representing blackness and the sweet whisper connoting whiteness.

Valente's vocal style was at the center of her musical persona, evidenced by the title chosen for her first US LP, *The Hi-Fi Nightingale* (1956). The repertoire placed Valente as a singer of Spanish and Latin American styles (including "Malaguena" and "The Breeze and I," as well as "Siboney," "Begin the Beguine," "Fiesta Cubana," and "[Tango] Jalousie"). The combination of repertoire, vocal staging, and Valente's hi-fi persona exemplifies how such records, as Tim Anderson puts it, "manifest not only exotic musical techniques but also recording methods and aesthetic sensibilities that appear exotic" to listeners.[64]

The title and cover iconography play on Valente's age and gender as a young girl whose voice sets her free (Figure 5). A technological fetishism continues in the liner notes: "The voice of Caterina Valente is an international sensation. It captured America through the medium of one exciting recording." Here, the caging-metaphor, suggested by the cover, is reversed: Her voice is set free but in doing

[64]Tim Anderson, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 162. For more on the combination of orientalizing styles and spatial recording technique in mid-century exotica, see Andrew Wenaus, "Anxiety in Stereo: Les Baxter's *Space Escapade*, Armchair Tourism, Polar Inertia, and Being-in-*a*-World," *Journal of Popular Music Studies* 26, no. 4 (2014): 484–502; and David Toop, *Exotica: Fabricated Soundscapes in the Real World* (London: Serpent's Tail, 1999).

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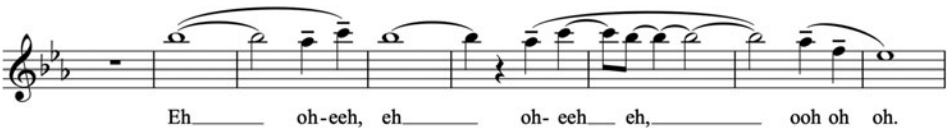

Example 5. Vocal introduction from "Poinciana."

so it captures US listeners.[65] The vocal and cosmopolitan are stressed in the rest of the text: she is "a true international star possessing a beauty and personality that match her sparkling vocal technique."[66] If one is to believe an anecdote told in her autobiography, part of the sparkle of "Malaguena" was a product of the recording's vocal staging. Werner Müller was unhappy with the initial takes: "It needs to sound like a dream and the voice must simply float and yet be very present."[67] In order to achieve this, they placed Valente's microphone in the marble-clad ladies' room, using it as a makeshift echo chamber and recording booth.[68] Similar to Babs's vocal staging on *Scandinavian Folk Songs*, this is a technique of soft-focus sound. The surplus of space not only gives her voice its extra "sparkle," but further feminizes her and gives her something akin to the "very feminine" and "foreign aura" identified by Marek in the way that it stresses the timbral qualities of her voice and suggests distance and thus perhaps foreignness.

During the rest of her US career she still relied heavily on Latin repertoire and sentimental pop songs, but her late-1950s attempt to break into the United States was sought via jazz. For her first album recorded in the United States, *Plenty Valente* (1957), Decca paired her with the Black arranger Sy Oliver and a big band. This followed the crossover practice established in swing music during the previous decade, according to which an African American sounding band was palatable for white audiences but generally required a white rather than Black singer.[69] The arrangements indeed point to the jazzier end of popular music, but Oliver and the producer, Milt Gabler, clearly found that her "rollercoaster voice" should be foregrounded from the very first song of the record, which pointed more in the direction of novelty and exotica. After a brass hit, "Poinciana" begins with Valente's voice floating above the band (Example 5). She enters with a gentle crescendo, and again her voice is staged via extra reverb, giving the impression of Valente coming to us from afar.

Valente's "Poinciana" worked as a well-chosen sequel to "Malaguena" and "The Breeze and I." The lyrics exchange the "blue night" of "Malaguena" with a "pale moon" and substitute the "breeze" for a "tropic wind." In music theory terms, we may label Valente's performance of the wind a *topic*.[70] This functioned as a vocal signifier, affording Valente with a vocal brand that fitted her persona. The wind topic and images of tropical shores are repeated in "Flamingo," and the theme of longing through the night is found again in "Nocturne for the Blues" (the jazz standard "Harlem Nocturne"). The wind topic

[65]This connection between technology and the "international" is not unique to Valente but places her within "the craze for exotic music [that] exactly coincides with a proliferation of pseudo-scientific discourse about audio equipment." Leydon, "Utopias of the Tropics," 61. Although Valente was never positioned via the same sexual allure as the most famous European woman of those years, Brigitte Bardot, there were parallels to her persona, summarized by Vanessa Schwartz as: "her youth, modernity, mobility, confidence, and freedom." Schwartz, "Who Killed Brigitte Bardot? Perspectives on the New Wave at Fifty," *Cinema Journal* 49, no. 4 (2010): 149.

[66]Liner notes for Caterina Valente, *The Hi-Fi Nightingale*, Decca, DL 8203, 1956. Liner notes.

[67]"Es muß wie ein Traum klingen, und die Stimme muß einfach schweben und trotzdem sehr präsent sein." Caterina Valente, *Bonjour, Katrin! Singen, tanzen, leben* (Bergisch Gladbach: Gustav Lübbe, 1985), 124.

[68]I will, however, suggest that Valente may be misremembering and that the recording in question was "The Breeze and I," which unlike "Malaguena" has considerable reverb on her voice and places her in the middle-to-back of the soundbox. She also states that she attributes the success of "Malaguena" to the arrangement, the "very special sound, the 'natural' echo-effect, and perhaps also my voice, which sometimes sounds more like a musical instrument than human song" ("dem ganz besonderen Sound, dem 'natürlichen' Echo-Effekt und vieleicht auch meiner Stimme, die manchmal mehr klingt wie ein Musikinstrument als wie menschlicher Gesang."). Valente, *Bonjour, Katrin!*, 124–25. Again, I suggest that this applies equally to "The Breeze and I," which also charted in the United States.

[69]David Brackett, *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2016), 173.

[70]Danuta Mirka, ed., *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

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appears in high-pitched vocal melismas, which have added reverb, not unlike Babs's voice on *Scandinavian Folk Songs*.[71] Thus, it is not only repertoire and lyrics that evoke the exotic. Peter Doyle has shown how spatial recording practices in mid-twentieth century popular music, created through echo and reverb, were used to set up *pictorial spaces* that often signify exotic locations and otherness.[72] *Plenty Valente* may consist of jazz standards played in a mainstream swing style, but Valente, Sy Oliver, and Milt Gabler managed to position her voice to signify distance, longing, and something exotic.

"She Has Overcome the Problem of Singing as Pretty as She Looks": Alice Babs and Duke Ellington

From the mid-1960s Babs ceased regular touring in the United States. She expanded her repertoire of European folk and art songs, and most importantly, throughout this period she actively sought to improve her technique by taking lessons from a classically trained vocal coach. But it was her collaborations with Duke Ellington that secured her legacy in US jazz history.

Babs first met up with Ellington for a 1963 recording session in Paris. The association with a jazz great like Ellington was, however, not enough to do away with the stylistic heterogeneity that troubled some listeners. The music historian Olle Edström recounts that Swedish critics "had issues with the many-sidedness of Alice Babs—that is, she sang everything from yodeling songs, schlager, and swing, to Elizabethan songs and (later) classical art songs, all with the same pure quality of voice, intonation, and musicality."[73] He also argues that there was a gendered bias in these assertions as "it seems as if the role of a female singer in a band entailed a stricter stylistic 'purity' that had to do both with gender and the quality of the voice."[74] Edström speculates that it may have been a consolation for Babs that, unlike the Swedish critics, Ellington "accepted her as a jazz artist."[75] This is probably true, but Ellington also selected Babs for his projects (most notably the second and third *Sacred Concerts*) because she inhabited a many-sidedness, which I argue was available to her—and Ellington—via her whiteness, ethnicity, and gender.

In his autobiography, Ellington describes Babs (referring to the *Second Sacred Concert*, 1968):

> [S]he is probably the most unique artist I know. She is a coloratura soprano, an unlimited soprano. She sings opera, she sings lieder, she sings what we call jazz and blues, she sings like an instrument, she even yodels, and she can read any and all of it! No matter how hard the intervals, when you hand her the music, she sight-reads and sings it as though she had rehearsed it a month. Every word comes out perfectly enunciated, understandable and believable. Alice Babs is a composer's dream, for with her he can forget all the limitations and just write his heart out. . . . She is a terrific musician, and when I look at pictures of her taken in the Cathedral Church of St. John the Divine—why, I think she looks like an angel! She is a beautiful person who has overcome the problem of singing as pretty as she looks.[76]

Describing her in otherworldly terms, Ellington positions her persona as—going back to Marek's words—"very female." Apart from her looks, he links otherworldliness to her coloratura-like singing, sight-reading skills, and virtuoso ability to perform difficult compositions. These are all techniques and values tied to the classical, European music that she had been studying in order to change her sound.

Both of the Sacred Concerts are vehicles for Babs's singing on open vowels with clear, classical music-like timbre in the highest range. Ellington composed music that, performed by Babs, sounds uncannily like classical art songs or European oratorios with, as Edström notes, "the sort of melodic

[71]Valente's wind topic is more ubiquitous and thus easier to assign than any particular element of Babs's singing. Yodeling certainly functioned as a topic for Babs, but from the 1960s onward she transformed it and instead used less semiotically clear signifiers. *Scandinavian Folk Songs* may provide the most direct parallel. Its vocal melismas, sonic space and reverb, and folk music repertoire point to what we might tentatively suggest as a cold, mountain topic.

[72]Doyle, *Echo and Reverb*, 6–9, 15, and 120–42.

[73]Olle Edström, "Ellington in Sweden," *Musical Quarterly* 96 (2013): 501.

[74]Edström, "Ellington in Sweden," 501.

[75]Edström, "Ellington in Sweden," 502.

[76]Duke Ellington, *Music is My Mistress* (New York: Da Capo, 1973), 288.

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lines that are more common in twentieth-century art music than popular music and jazz."[77] Ellington's oeuvre is replete with music that bridges low, middle, and highbrow forms. In this case, he composed music that both in its formal structure and in its use of Babs's voice gestured toward modernist, European music and employed her whiteness to signal highbrow universalism.[78]

Babs's voice was no longer "bright," but instead, according to Leonard Feather, it was "glorious"[79] with "unprecedented radiance" and, indeed, specifically "feminine."[80] Most reviews named her as a "soprano" (not simply as "singer"). The *New York Times*'s reviews are indicative and comment extensively on the quality of her voice. It was "pure" with "warm translucence,"[81] but also invoking her Nordic identity through associations with landscape familiar from *Scandinavian Folk Songs* by describing her voice as "clear, clean and sparkling as a running mountain stream."[82]

Remarking on these timbral qualities, the US press was engaging in what Melanie L. Marshall has called a *purity logic* of the voice.[83] Such (sonic and spatial) perceptions of purity are not only a matter of class and gender but is also racially coded as white. Jennifer Stoever has traced the US reception of a "pure," European, virtuosic voice back to another Swede, the so-called Swedish nightingale, Jenny Lind. The US ear linked whiteness, femininity, and nationality in the voice of Lind during her US tour, 1850–1852. US-Americans thought that clear-toned soprano voices embodied a "female range" that was characteristically far away from the lower pitches signifying African American vocality.[84] A century later Lind's compatriot, Babs, came to the United States performing in a style that emphasized the highest ranges of the female voice with timbral qualities that are associated both with European classical music and European folk music. The fact that these vocal gestures signified something "angelic," "pure," "graceful," and "controlled" is also part of their white privilege, as such gestures are always already embodied even when they are heard as transcending their bodily origins. By contrast the sonic colorline would demand that a black voice always remain rooted in the body. This resonates especially with the religious context of Ellington's sacred. When Babs was heard as angelic, it is through a discourse that uses her gender, class, and identity as an argument for the transcendence of her body, and this relies on her vocal embodiment of whiteness.

Even though listeners heard her radiant voice as a signifier of sophistication and transcendence there was still an element of her yodel-singing in her improvisation. In "Almighty God Has Those Angels" her vocal fills include rocking motifs, reminiscent of the vocal oscillations of yodeling (Example 6). What we do not hear, however, is direct instrument imitation or the use of scat syllables that often signify vocal blackness. Instead, Babs opts for singing in the highest register, on an open "oh," supporting her clear timbre and whiteness.

Babs's change from yodel girl to Ellingtonian hymn singer follows the standard narrative of jazz going from lowly pop to high art.[85] I would, however, also suggest that her career and style show that this was not a case of jazz "naturally" evolving into a (high) art form nor that it was revolutionized

[77]Edström, "Ellington in Sweden," 503.

[78]On Ellington and cultural hierarchies, see John Howland, *Ellington Uptown: Duke Ellington, James P. Johnson, and the Birth of the Jazz Concert* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2009); John Howland, "Marketing to the Middlebrow: Reconsidering Ellingtonia, the Legacy of Early Ellington Criticism, and the Idea of a 'Serious' Jazz Composer," in *Duke Ellington Studies*, ed. John Howland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 32–75; and Catherine Tackley, "'Art or Debauchery?': The Reception of Ellington in the U.K.," in *Duke Ellington Studies*, ed. John Howland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 100–7.

[79]Leonard Feather, "Ellington Plays Sacred Concert," *Los Angeles Times*, April 16, 1968. The word is also used multiple times in Ed Steane, review of *Second Sacred Concert*, *Hip* 9 [14], no. 6 (1971), 20–21.

[80]Leonard Feather, "Ellington, 69, Pursuing Musical Muse," *Los Angeles Times*, December 22, 1968.

[81]John S. Wilson, "Ellington Still Changes," *New York Times*, July 4, 1971

[82]John S. Wilson, "Alice Babs Puts Sparkling Voice in Duke's Song," *New York Times*, July 3, 1973.

[83]Melanie L. Marshall, "*Voce Bianca*: Purity and Whiteness in British Early Music Vocality," *Women & Music* 19 (2015), 42. There is a parallel to the early US reception of another Swede, Ingrid Bergman, and the subsequent construction of her persona, defined as wholesome, pure, and spiritual, by the US film industry. David W. Smit, "Marketing Ingrid Bergman," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 22, no. 3 (2005): 237–50.

[84]Stoever, *The Sonic Color Line*, 86.

[85]Scott DeVeaux, "Constructing the Jazz Tradition: Jazz Historiography," *Black American Literature Forum*, 25, no. 3 (1991): 525–60.

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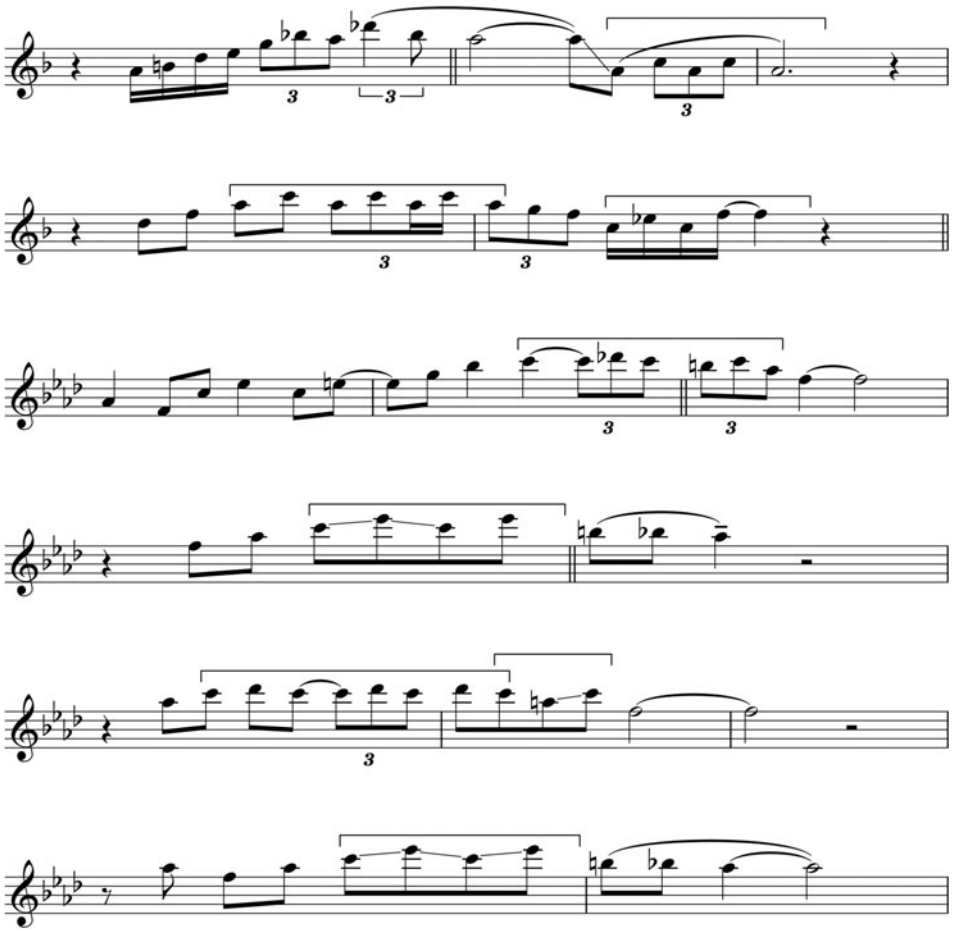

Example 6. Excerpts from Babs's vocal fills in "Almighty God" from 2:28; all sung on "oh"; brackets mark "yodel"-motifs.

and thrust upwards in the cultural hierarchy. Rather, Babs actively transformed her voice using the techniques of classical music and that these techniques were closely linked to such a "low" style as yodeling, which also carried connotations that met at the intersections of race, ethnicity, and gender.

"Miss Valente Sings in Six Languages, Cooks in Most Languages Too": Catarina Valente's Domestic Internationalism

From the late 1950s through the 1960s, Valente became a major name in the United States. Her voice was still a point of positioning, exemplified by an album like *Superfonics* (1961) using the rhetoric of *The Hi-Fi Nightingale* to describe the marriage of recording technology and "her extraordinary dynamic range" and "incomparable vocalizing."[86] Thus, much of the US reception of her music continued along the positive notes of the 1950s, but sour notes also began trickling in. In a review of her appearance in a 1963 Bing Crosby TV special, she is accused of marring a song to the point where it is "stylized beyond recognition."[87] This type of accusation had appeared by the late 1950s and been

[86]Liner notes for Caterina Valente, *Superfonics*, RCA Victor, LSP-2241 (1961).
[87]Paul Gardner, "Bing Crosby Appears with Buddy Ebsen and Caterina Valente," *New York Times*, November 8, 1963.

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brought against artists associated with hi-fi aesthetics, such as Valente. It reflected a change in attitudes towards adult pop, where the appeal of jazz-inflected pop and sentimental ballads from the major labels shifted. What had once seemed well produced, now seemed overproduced.[88]

A further problem contributing to Valente's falling popularity in the United States may have been that her girlish image from the 1950s was being substituted for a more mature persona. She thus hit the problem identified by Laurie Stras, "we don't want girl singers to be women."[89] No longer a caged virgin bird, she appeared as the adult woman in talk shows with famous male hosts or was portrayed as a housewife in the press. In the latter case, the domestic identity was paired with her life as jet-setting star by using cooking as a metaphor for her cosmopolitan identity and vocal versatility: "Miss [*sic*] Valente, who sings in six languages . . . cooks in most languages too."[90] Elsewhere she was described as "musical goulash,"[91] and a review that makes the link between repertoire and cooking, lauds her as a polyglot, and praises the way she compartmentalizes national musical styles ("she uses different musical arrangers for each language").[92] Her cooking is linked to middle-class heteronormative femininity which by extension is connected to voice and identity.

Valente still occupied an international position and had gained an adult persona, but the judgement was that her music and voice had suffered. The US desire for a "very female" voice may then also be a desire for the youthful voice. A possible precursor to Valente (and Babs), Deanna Durbin, serves as a point of comparison. Durbin initially inhabited a pan-European identity through her operatic repertoire and film narratives that gave her various Europe origins (she was Canadian, raised in California). Later, her film company tried to strip her of her European characteristics and give her a more adult persona, which, according to Jennifer Fleeger, ironically "only made her appear more foreign, for her characteristic voice failed to signify anything but opera."[93] The same irony could be at play in the case of Valente. Unlike Babs who transitioned from the easy listening era and secured her place in the jazz canon via Ellington, Valente engaged in the full range of middle-of-the-road pop and TV, but lost her star in the United States as those vocal sounds were eclipsed by the youthful authenticity of rock.[94] By the late 1960s Valente sounded too much like the aging crooners she appeared alongside on US TV.

This part of her career peaked when she briefly became the co-host of the talk show *The Entertainers*. She was still presented as an "international" star, who could toggle between identities and as a conduit of exotic styles. In some cases, this even went as far as presenting her as an expert of music that she held no national or ethnic claim to. Her imitation of African American singing sounded increasingly inauthentic, but at the end of her US career she leveraged her associations with Latin American music to appear as a bossa nova singer. In a 1966 appearance on *The Dean Martin Show*, she and the host are chatting, and Martin plays off of Valente's accent and goes into an undefinable European accent (Italian, French, German?) prompted by her suggestion that they sing bossa nova.[95] He thus willfully and/or comically mistakes the Brazilian origin of that style for Valente's pan-European persona. Furthermore, she is positioned as a musical authority, teaching Martin how to sing the bossa nova. Here, Valente is the "ideal appropriator" via cosmopolitan

[88]Albin Zak, "No-Fi: Crafting a Language of Recorded Music in 1950s Pop," in *The Art of Record Production*, ed. Simon Frith and Simon Zagorski-Thomas (New York: Routledge, 2012), 52.

[89]Laurie Stras, "Introduction: She's So Fine, or Why Girl Singers (Still) Matter," in *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence, and Class in 1960s Music*, ed. Laurie Stras (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010), 4.

[90]Cecil Fleming, "Caterina Valente Cooks Up Storm," *Los Angeles Times*, November 21, 1966.

[91]"Berlitz Baedeker," *Newsweek*, March 16, 1964.

[92]John S. Wilson, "Caterina Valente, Polylingual Vocalist," *New York Times*, May 19, 1964.

[93]Jennifer Fleeger, *Mismatched Women: The Siren's Song Through the Machine* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 98.

[94]In this sense Babs and Valente ended up on each side of the "fault line" described by Vincent Stephens, "Crooning at the Fault Lines: Theorizing Jazz and Pop Vocal Singing Discourse in the Rock Era, 1955–1978," *American Music* 26, no. 2 (2008): 156–95.

[95]I have not been able to pinpoint the exact date of this performance. Epguides.com lists three appearances of Valente on *The Dean Martin Show*, November 17, 1966, December 16, 1967, and December 5, 1968, "The Dean Martin Show (a Titles & Air Dates Guide)," *Epguides.com*, http://epguides.com/DeanMartinShow/; Dean Martin and Caterina Valente, "One Note Samba," *The Dean Martin Show*, n.d., https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuEv942wOZs.

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authentication.[96] Such a combination of cosmopolitanism and cultural appropriation, I argue, is an ability predicated upon her whiteness, as white people are allowed to pick up other voices and master them, in contrast to people of color who can only be essentialized as representative of their own ethnicity. Her foreignness came not from a direct representation of specific German, Italian, French, or even Brazilian authenticity and ethnicity, but from a reification of multiculturalism, difference, and cosmopolitanism itself, which was also predicated upon her whiteness.

Conclusions

Babs and Valente were cast as "*very* female" with "the allure of a foreign aura," expressed and perceived through the use of the highest soprano range, "pure" timbres, and a repertoire that emphasized non-US places. In the case of Babs that place was Scandinavia and later via her more "classical" sound, it was a broader, highbrow northern Europe; Valente's geographic signifiers were more widespread, because her persona was constructed through a southern-European identity that stretched from Istanbul to Brazil. Their voices, ethnicity, and gender, produced through musical markers of difference, were commodified as products for the white US middle classes, positioned as domestically safe, yet exotically alluring.

Their "female" and "foreign aura" was often found in vocalises. Jacqueline Warwick posits that such vocables "express more than conventional language allows."[97] Similarly, Roland Barthes famously found *the grain of the voice* in "a dual posture, dual production—of language and music." The melismatic vocalises of Babs and Valente were perhaps, in Barthes's words, an attempt to "displace the fringe of contact between language and music."[98] These points of contact were indeed placed at the fringe of the vocal range and at the fringes of songs, in introductions, middle sections, and codas. These vocalises use open vowels and clear timbre that float above the rest of the music and embody a "very female" range, style, and technique, which was also tied to whiteness. The fact that these vocal gestures may signify the "pure" and "controlled" is part of their white privilege. When Babs was heard as angelic, it was through a discourse that uses her gender and identity to transcend her body, which relies on her whiteness. Similarly, Valente was lauded for her versatile voice and transnational performance, which was tied to her talents as a polyglot and the cosmopolitanism she thus embodied, but this flexibility of identities was predicated upon her whiteness (as perhaps also evidenced by the fact that African American transnationalism, by comparison, was explicitly politicized and antagonistic to hegemonic US society). The use of non-language vocalizing positioned Babs's and Valente's identity as something alluring, exotic, and foreign, yet not more different than it could be easily consumed.

However, rather than seeing Babs's and Valente's voices as endpoints of essentialized, commodified performance, my argument is that the fact that they were essentialized and commodified is indicative of their reception and positioning. Nina Sun Eidsheim points out that "because the myth of vocal essentialism and innateness runs so deep, we create complex, schizophrenic, layered listening situations in order to compensate for confrontations with the non-essential nature of voice—confrontations caused, for instance, by vocal likeness, imitation, or ventriloquism."[99] Babs and Valente were active players in the game of vocal likeness, imitation, and ventriloquism, but they were also being played. When Babs and Valente went to the United States, the game of vocal likeness cast them as jazz and pop singers imitating African American styles and as white and/or cosmopolitan Europeans who were inevitably foreign.

[96]Valente's reification of cosmopolitanism and Martin's caricature of it also serves as an example of why Sarah Collins and Dana Gooley issue the warning: "We should be wary of using the term cosmopolitanism as a casual descriptor for the multitude of diverse encounters, affiliations, and alliances we discover. Not all border-crossing encounters reflect or produce cosmopolitan sensibilities." Here, Martin's sensibility (or lack thereof) and Valente's identity is instead closer to "the stereotype of the rootless or effete cosmopolitan, which took shape in the late nineteenth century and effectively reduced 'cosmopolitan' to an identity marked by a lifestyle of luxury and travel." Collins and Gooley, "Music and the New Cosmopolitanism: Problems and Possibilities," *Musical Quarterly* 99, no. 2 (2016): 140–41.

[97]Warwick, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture*, 38.

[98]Roland Barthes, "The Grain of the Voice," in *Image—Music—Text* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 181.

[99]Eidsheim, *The Race of Sound*, 23–24.

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The US careers of Babs and Valente show us that notions of what constitutes musical US-Americanness or Europeanness are not created separately on either side of the Atlantic but emerge in a transatlantic dialectic. These case studies reveal that gender and class are important categories in the formation of European identities and that such identities were not created in Europe and then imported to the United States but were created in the process of transmission into the United States. Furthermore, though often less obvious, race and ethnicity were used by musicians, critics, and listeners to position Babs and Valente as Europeans. Their whiteness was transposed in a US context and their stories tell us as much about US ideologies of whiteness as it does about European ethnicities.

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