

MARY TALUSAN



# INSTRUMENTS OF EMPIRE

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Filipino Musicians, Black Soldiers,  
and Military Band Music during  
US Colonization of the Philippines

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## Instruments of Empire: Brass Bands, Black Soldiers, and American Imperialism in the Philippines

Military brass bands are musical ensembles that communicate ideas and sentiments about the nation they represent. The nation's military character is conveyed visually through the size of the ensemble, the glint of powerful, modern brass instruments, the strict code of dress, and the precise, coordinated movements of band members under the direction of an officer. Military music compositions, like many national anthems, including "The Star-Spangled Banner,"<sup>1</sup> typically contain elegant, stately melodies supported by conventional Western harmonic progressions that are enhanced by the swell of sound to a loud but controlled expression of patriotism's emotional force, driven by heroic rhythmic gestures and punctuated by the crash of cymbals. Outdoors, sound waves from the powerful brass and drums can be felt viscerally by those in the crowd, enhancing the emotional force of self-affirming pride in the nation. For example, the US Marine Band playing for presidential inaugurations and Independence Day is an iconic part of American patriotic celebrations. Patriotic marches like "The Stars and Stripes Forever," "God Bless America," and "My Country, 'Tis of Thee" enculturate Americans to connect music and musical sound to expressions and feelings of patriotism. Military brass bands like the US Marine Band are rooted in European aesthetics of military band performance, an influence that made its way to the United States by the nineteenth century.

Centuries earlier, however, the earliest military bands appeared in India and the Middle East. During the twelfth century, Ottoman Turks deployed *mehter* (military) bands with loud horns, drums, and cymbals in battle to spread fear among their enemies (Suppan and Suppan 2001, 684). By the seventeenth century, European armies employed ensembles of drum, fife, and pipe in the field, as well as larger ensembles with additional wind and brass instruments for social and ceremonial functions (685). A worldwide brass band movement burst forth during the nineteenth century, and the ensemble became an iconic feature of the modern nation (see Herbert 2000 and Smith 2004). In the colonies, European-style military bands played a central role by constructing “an image of empire” that served to “authenticate ideas of authority through military power” (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, 169). By the late nineteenth century, when Americans arrived in the Philippines, the military band was already a well-established instrument of empire.

In the Philippines, following three centuries of Spanish colonial rule and religious influence, the brass band underwent pronounced localization and existed as a distinct tradition called *banda* by the 1800s. Each regimental unit of the Spanish colonial army included a brass band manned by natives who the Spanish called *indios*, and some of these men were promoted to the prestigious position of Spanish regimental bandmaster (Tan 2014, 62). Respected musicians went on to found numerous civilian town bands that developed rich musical and cultural traditions in their respective communities (Rubio 1977, 4). In the early twentieth century, American imperialists neither introduced the brass band tradition to Filipinos nor radically altered it after colonization in 1898; they simply redirected the *meaning* of the performance of brass bands in the Philippines to portray their uniquely elaborate logic of benevolent rule, tutelage, and assimilation.

Drawing on texts that trace the history of colonial brass bands in the British Empire, I analyze how colonial military bands in the Philippines were deployed to symbolize the benefits and benevolence of American rule. Then, I provide an account of European music in the Philippines to establish that it was a language and tradition with which Filipinos already had a long history before US rule. Hence, Filipino band musicians easily fit into the culture of US military bands and excelled in the repertoire and performance style, offering a way for them to envision their role as valued members of colonial society. After connecting the history of brass bands in the Philippines and Americans’ hegemonic redirection of the meaning of military bands, I bring into this

dialogue the specific context of Black American soldier-musicians in the Philippines. Doing so elucidates how Walter H. Loving attained recognition in the context of segregation and racism in the US military to become the perfect public figure to lead America's premiere colonial military band. While this specific context makes the PC Band unique, the band's performances were meant to purvey and indoctrinate "civilized" Western values among native populations, similar to other colonial military bands in European empires. Given that Filipino musicians brought with them exceptional skills in European music, this message was even more effective in the US colonial Philippines in circulating the perception that the PC Band's playing of the patriotic tunes of the colonizer could be equated with Filipinos' enthusiasm and patriotic intent toward the United States, a key feature of the concept of benevolent assimilation. Despite this strong message, I highlight some of the ways that the bandsmen and Loving exercised agency to express their own identities as excellent musicians in their performances.

### Military Bands and the Colonial Context

In British India, the military brass band was "a crucial part of the apparatus through which Indian subjects could be impressed by, and British rulers reassured of, the strength and purpose of the imperial enterprise" (Herbert and Barlow 2013, 254). By the mid-1800s, native musicians in India were paid from public funds, evidence that the "provision of military music was important, and that it was accommodated on substantial scale" (265). A booming commercial business in the production of brass instruments produced surpluses of secondhand army instruments in Britain that were sent overseas (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, 170). In the tropical climates of many colonies, brass instruments were the perfect instruments of empire because they were durable and unaffected by extremes of weather or humidity and symbolized the invincibility and endurance of European culture in the colonies. The sonic strength of the brass instruments supported by percussion was most powerful at outdoor public events, especially before the invention of electric sound amplification, and brass band music created a potent soundscape to draw in listeners. Indeed, "the very adoption of the brass band for public, collective affairs has been frequently attributed to its volume and attention-grabbing capabilities" (Reily and Brucher 2013, 18).

For the colonized, the colonial military band heralded not the independence of their nation, but an imperial power's superiority and authority. The colonial band was a "small-scale metaphor for the colonial process itself—a single foreign bandmaster exerting authority over numerous native bandmen who were expected to abandon their traditional ways of making music in favour of more 'civilised' European ways" (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, 172). The superiority and domination of European culture seemed to be accepted by the natives themselves when they adopted the colonizer's musical language, their uniforms, and the bodily comportment of the European military band aesthetic. This symbolized not only subjugation, but also assimilation to European values, projecting a future directed by Western modernity and progress. Colonial military bands were most visible in official ceremonies of the colonial state, where music was used "as a means of demonstrating and disseminating their values, particularly European notions of order and discipline" (170). In this way, the colonial military band was not only a political expression, but a cultural one that had a formidable impact among the populace through its sound, repertoire, and appearance.

But this is only a partial account of the story. Despite the tradition's veneer of European superiority, skilled native musicians found brass instruments and military march music relatively easy to play, and they learned the repertoire quickly (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, 167). Rather than being mastered by Western music, native musicians mastered it quite easily, and by playing along with this arrangement, native men seemed to give their consent to foreign rule and demonstrate a high degree of assimilation to the colonizing power. If we look closely, however, we might see that the white bandmaster and the native musicians were not segregated completely but rather required to work together toward a common goal. If we listen critically, we might hear a successful musical performance that depended on the effort and skill of the native musicians working in collaboration with the white bandmaster. Musically, each individual had to "play his part" in the collective, whether he was a soloist or one of several instrumentalists in a section, to follow a leader that kept the group together. As an ensemble of skilled musicians, "much of their sonic impact is predicated upon the mobilization of a group of people for collective musicking" (Reily and Brucher 2013, 17). "Musicking," according to Christopher Small, is an "activity in which all those present are involved and for whose nature and quality, success or failure, everyone present bears some responsibility" (1998, 10). Native musicians and European bandmasters

had to collaborate seamlessly and equally to achieve musical unity and to convey a sense of enthusiasm and excitement to the crowd, presenting the possibilities of successful colonial partnership.

At public concerts and parades, music could be enjoyed communally across otherwise segregated sectors of society, albeit in socially complicated ways. For colonized audiences, bands provided an “uplifting element when it was sorely needed and unlikely to transpire from any other source” (Herbert and Barlow 2013, 243). For colonialists, military bands “enliven[ed] the social life of officers and maintain[ed] the morale of the rank and file” (241). For both colonizer and colonized, band performances broke up the monotony of daily life and released tensions between social groups. The exciting sound and the creation of collective effervescence was not necessarily an indication of the enthusiasm of colonized people for colonial domination, but represented the possibilities of affable collaboration and the natives’ own success at mastering European music.

Colonial bands represented a newly configured social order taking shape under colonial rule, including the possibility of modernization, especially to those who were marginalized in their precolonial societies. In many cases, though certainly not all, native musicians came not from a single ethnic group or “tribe,” but rather were brought together as multiethnic participants (Herbert and Sarkissian 1997, 173). This unifying of diverse people into a single organization was in and of itself an expression of modernity, because it radically diverged from traditional ethnic, social, and political divisions. European brass band music became the lingua franca of diverse cultural and linguistic groups to communicate and express colonial modernity breaking away from customary, restrictive social norms. As modern expressions, brass bands became highly esteemed in the colony, and local rulers “quickly adopted both the military band and the notion of it as a symbol of royal status” (171). Soon enough, brass band ensembles were localized into native cultures, long before the independence of colonized nations. The agency of musicians and audiences resulted in the “huge diversity of hybrid forms to be found within the global brass band complex” (Reily and Brucher 2013, 16), and many of these localized forms of brass band music, repertoire, and cultural context continue to thrive today (see Boonzajer Flaes 2000). For the native musician, joining a colonial military band was a way to gain employment and recognition in ways that were restricted before colonization.

For audiences, music enlivened daily life, enhanced festivities and celebrations, and modeled collaboration between colonizer and colonized as well as between local groups. Following de Certeau's (1984) assessment of how space is transformed by how people utilize it, Reily and Brucher assert that "bands can transform places into spaces and spaces into places, continuously actualizing spaces during their performances and identifying places through their presence" (2013, 18). Unlike the Ottoman *mehter* band, whose purpose was to scare and threaten enemies with its volume of sound, brass band performances in European colonies created spaces for collaboration between disparate groups. Small argues that the "act of musicking establishes in the place where it is happening a set of relationships, and it is in those relationships that the meaning of the act lies" (1998, 13). The "meaning of the act," however, is contingent on the context of time and place, is subject to change, and is often shaped by the perspectives of the powers that be. The agency of native musicians and local audiences must be analyzed in what James C. Scott refers to as "hidden transcripts" embedded in the "manifold strategies by which subordinate groups manage to insinuate their resistance, in disguised forms, into the public transcript" (1990, 136), since the official voices of "many historically important subordinate groups [are] irrecoverable for all practical purposes" and their acts of agency are "muted and veiled" (138). I will return to this theme of hidden transcripts within representations of the PC Band's performances by newspapers and international expositions throughout this work.

In the Philippines, the appearance of collaboration and assimilation between colonizer and colonized was much easier to achieve since the natives were already experts at band music and thus could be presented as exceedingly adaptable to American ways. The language of European music through the Catholic Church was already the norm among the populace of lowland Christian Luzon, and few sonic traces of indigenous music endured in these cultures.<sup>2</sup> The already entrenched tradition of *banda* (brass band) music in the Philippines made a superficial transition to American military band style, itself heavily drawing on and defined by European models. In this milieu, it only appeared as if Filipinos wholly adopted Euro-American brass band music because obvious sonic markers of indigenous Filipino culture were invisible or at least inaudible to the imperial ear. Evidence of distinct local practices in *banda*, Philippine brass band performance, is inaudible when regarding musical sound as the only manifestation of

cultural distinctiveness. As I discuss below and throughout this book, Filipino distinctiveness existed not in the musical composition itself, but rather in performance style, as well as conceptualization of and meaning-making within, the language of military band music.

### European Music in the Philippines

Hundreds of years before the arrival of the United States, starting in the sixteenth century, Spanish religious institutions taught and disseminated European music in the Philippines. D. R. M. Irving's book *Colonial Counterpoint: Music in Early Modern Manila* examines in rich detail the imposition of European music by the Spanish and its integration into local traditions by indigenous musicians. While European religious music was compulsory and enforced by the Catholic Church, Irving's central argument was that Spanish colonialism did not simply wipe out indigenous music among Christianized populations in Luzon, but that a flourishing native musical tradition emerged out of Manila's cosmopolitan, global milieu. Irving insists, "If we are to begin to understand the globalization of musics, we need to examine its history, and return to where it all started in 1571: Manila" (2010, 8). Manila, as the Spanish Philippines' colonial capital, was "the missing link in the concatenation of mercantile, political, and intellectual enterprises that characterized the emergence of a global consciousness and global networks in the early modern period" (8). Piecing together extant archival material from the late sixteenth century to the end of the eighteenth century, Irving explains that there was a gradual assimilation of European musical forms into indigenous music-making as well as an accommodation of indigenous practices by Spanish authorities. While Spaniards banned most indigenous practices, they had to allow some elements to continue: "European missionaries censored and modified [indigenous musicians'] song-texts and composed many new works, actively encouraging [them] to 'forget' precolonial non-Christian practices. European dances and dance music were introduced, and indigenous dances were retained but performed to European music" (235). In addition to allowing some indigenous forms of dance to continue, the Spanish used the melody, harmony, and form of European music to accompany indigenous musicopoetic genres called *auit*, *loa*, and *pasyon*. Irving argues that these poetic forms with European

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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Mary Talusan (Mary Talusan Lacanlale) is assistant professor of Asian-Pacific Studies at California State University, Dominguez Hills. She has a PhD from the Department of Ethnomusicology at the University of California, Los Angeles, and performs Philippine gong music with the Pakaraguian Kulintang Ensemble.