Postlude

"GANGNAM STYLE" WAS THE GLOBAL POP SENSATION OF 2012.[1] It registered more than a billion hits on YouTube and became the most-watched music video in that medium's short but star-studded history. Psy's signature dance moves could be seen everywhere. In an oncology ward near Oxford, England, a seventy-eight-year-old British woman addled by morphine exclaimed, "That's . . . that's . . . 'Gangnam Style'!" every time she encountered a screen, whether it was attached to a CT scanner or belonged to a television set broadcasting *Coronation Street*.[2] From "Obama Style" to "Mitt Romney Style," the sheer number of imitations and parodies bespoke the omnipresence of "Gangnam Style." When the Chinese authorities suppressed the artist Ai Weiwei's "Grass-Mud Horse Style," Ai's fellow artist Anish Kapoor shot back with "Gangnam for Freedom."[3] So much for those who believed that K-pop would never make it in the United States, or for those who still deny that pop music has any significance, whether artistic or political.[4]

An indispensable element of popularity, when it comes to "Gangnam Style" or any other piece of popular music, is that it be catchy, as if to ride the proverbial wave. Catchiness, as an aesthetic principle, has numerous synonyms, at times embodied in literal-sounding metaphors (such as "hook") and at times expressed in more literary terms (such as "leitmotif"), but the point is that a popular-music video must have memorable and reproducible lyrical refrains and dance steps. These units of sound and movement generate a short narrative, which in turn can be elaborated and transposed to generate imitations and parodies. For non-Korean listeners,

only two phrases are legible in Psy's song—"Hey, sexy lady" and "Gangnam Style"—but the dance steps (a pony-riding gallop and a lasso-twirling sway) are readily comprehensible and imitable. If I am right about the centrality of units of sound and movement to this genre of music video, then Psy's glossolalic lyrics are irrelevant. After all, given his rap articulation, I had to watch the video half a dozen times before I could make out what he was saying, and this kind of experience—musical appreciation without any linguistic comprehension—is surely more common than not. The only thing that has to be understood is the reproducible refrain; the rest is phatic (or perhaps the point is that the lyrics must be recognizable as part of the music, as evinced by many opera fans who are moved by arias sung in languages that they do not understand). In this compositional style, what the audience perceives is the broad background of conventions—the format of the music video, or a recognizable music genre, such as rap—against which interesting and imitable refrains and gestures captivate and prove irresistible. That the protagonist of "Gangnam Style" is a South Korean national may render him exotic, but common cultural references—associations ranging from the obvious (the once feared but now parodied Kim Jong-il) to Mike Myers (in his role as Austin Powers)—tame any sense of Psy as the inscrutable other. And popularity frequently begets more popularity, rendering the absence of popularity more notable than popularity's saturation of the media (mass or social) and everyday interactions. The obvious humor of "Gangnam Style," its cheekiness and even its cheesiness, merely add to the charm of Psy, the scrutable Other.

To be sure, one may wish to trace Psy's work to a long tradition of Korean performance art (*kwangdae*) or to engage in a contextual and political reading of the video's lyrics and imagery. The possibilities are as numerous as the potential theories and theorists, the eager pundits and bloggers. Yet all such readings would be supererogatory, precisely because it is the reproducibility (along with the possibility of permutation) of the sound bites and dance steps that makes "Gangnam Style" so memorable, so marvelous. The sort of joy that most people find in Psy's performance is incommensurable with the sort of delight that one may derive from a year-

long immersion in Proust's *A la recherche du temps perdu* or from voluntary submission to a four-straight-night performance of Wagner's *Ring.* Just as one wouldn't use the same criteria to compare Tolstoy's long novels with Chekhov's short stories, one shouldn't seek, in the name of a category called "music," to bring one's musical judgment to bear on an aesthetic comparison between Sibelius and Psy. I will add only that if we were to impose a formal definition on the video "Gangnam Style," we would call it a specimen of *Gesamtkunstwerk.* But "Gangnam Style" is neither *Der Ring des Nibelungen* nor *Das Nibelungenlied.* To believe otherwise is make a category mistake, a classificatory error—and, to express this in the vernacular, some people just don't get it.

POPULAR MUSIC AS A CATEGORY OF EXPERIENCE

Without sanctifying or damning popular music at the level of art, we can acknowledge an inescapable reality: that popular music in the twenty-first century has become music pure and simple for the vast majority of the music-loving public. In addition, the term "popular music" no longer represents a coherent category—the sheer diversity of styles and genres within this category is daunting in and of itself—and few people require extended commentary on popular music's legitimacy. Popular music, or music, just *is;* now the only question is whether intellectuals and academics will deal with that reality or remain ensconced in the imaginary museum of absolute music or other, putatively superior, styles and genres.

As I have suggested, the very adjective "popular" has consigned, or condemned, a vast universe of music to the realm of the demotic: the vulgar and superficial, the ignoble and ignorant. Whether popular music was pilloried as a crass product of the culture industry or lamented as an unfortunate manifestation of ill-mannered youth, the history of popular music has been coeval with the history of its opprobrium. There is, however, no urgent intellectual need to rehabilitate the honor of popular music. When the distinguished literary critic Christopher Ricks or the

eminent cultural historian Sean Wilentz writes a tome on Bob Dylan, these searing lines by William Butler Yeats come to mind:

> Bald heads forgetful of their sins,
> Old, learned, respectable bald heads
> Edit and annotate the lines
> That young men, tossing on their beds,
> Rhymed out in love's despair
> To flatter beauty's ignorant ear.[5]

The world of popular music, like the world of young lovers, at once defies the moral deliberation of its elders and is enmeshed in the immediacy of worldly pleasure. The unusually reflective and the prematurely wistful have their place—as do the "old, learned, respectable" heads, hirsute or bald—but we shouldn't forget that the paucity, until recently, of writing on popular music says nothing about the value of popular music in the modern world.

The world of scholarship does what it does; the recuperation of the best and the brightest begins to redeem a vast territory of passion and experience and to transmogrify it into learning, above all as history. We should be able to articulate a history of the present as well, not only to illuminate a phenomenon (without explaining it away, however) but also to see in it, and by it, something about the way we live. An impeccable logic suggests that the only proper way for one to respond to popular music, or to any other expression of the human spirit, is to engage in the same medium or genre oneself. Yet there is considerable truth in what T. S. Eliot says: it is "not always true that a person who knows a good poem when he sees it can tell us why it is a good poem."[6] Music, in turn, good or otherwise, is not completely resistant to external accounts, descriptions, and explanations; musicians, fans, producers, and writers produce such things all the time. The pragmatic reality is that, imperfect though we are at articulating things at the abstract level, all of us can still get better at talking about things, popular music included.

Popular music in its current articulation, having eschewed the cult of listening in silence (the cult, that is, of pondering in semisacred reverence, and quasi-sacred meditation, the genius of music), has recovered sound and its connections to other senses, most obviously the visual and the tactile. People watch music videos as much as they listen to music; they may sway or dance in response to aural and visual stimuli. At the very least, popular music is a multifaceted form of entertainment that one can listen to and sing to, watch and emulate, improvise on, and in turn improve. Surely the experience of consuming popular music is not passive at all—to begin with, one must make a selection from a welter of choices—and the experience is certainly not imposed from above, whether by government authorities, teachers, parents, or corporate establishments; indeed, at least in the vast swath of the advanced industrial world, an authority figure's recommendation alone would be enough to squelch both the enjoyment and the popularity of a particular piece of music. In any case, not since the heyday of European classical music, in the nineteenth century, have listeners come so close to replicating the activity of performers, whether by lip-synching or singing, by drumming or dancing.

Popular music, far from the realm of the serious and the sober, remains, along with sex, drugs, and sports, the realm par excellence of ecstasy and emotional experience. Much as we pontificate on the supremacy of art, it is usually in the domain of popular entertainment—sentimental novels, long-form television, and popular music—that people tend to experience aesthetic rupture. Nowadays it is rare to find anyone who, like Stendhal, can be stupefied by a work of visual art, but many people have been moved by the banal refrain of a popular song. I am surely not alone in crying over a supposedly meaningless pop song, and what could be deeper and more authentic than my tears? Moreover, tears are not just honest and sincere (or so we have come to believe); they are also, in a sense, music materialized.[7] We cannot begin to plumb the nature and depth of contemporary senses and sensibilities without understanding the role of popular music in shaping, reflecting, and inflecting emotional life.

ENVOI

Psy's 2012 viral hit "Gangnam Style" was by no means the first East Asian or Asian American musical sensation in the United States. In 2011, Far East Movement (also known as FM), a group that includes two Korean American members, reached the top spot on the *Billboard* chart with "Like a G6." Yet what is even more remarkable is that some five decades earlier, in 1963, Sakamoto Kyū (billed as Kyu Sakamoto in the United States) had a huge hit with "Sukiyaki" (the Japanese-language title was "Ue o muite arukō"), a record that spent three weeks as the number 1 song on the US charts. (In contrast, the Beatles' first release in the United States that year—"Please Please Me," an explosive hit in Britain—barely made a ripple.) Sakamoto's wave of popularity extended beyond Japan and the United States; the song, also a number 1 hit in Norway and Israel, among other countries, was one of the most memorable melodies in the world at the time.[8] Prod a sexagenarian (or someone older) in one of the OECD countries, and she is likely to recognize the tune and perhaps start humming it. Sakamoto would go on to have a long and successful career in Japan, one that lasted until 1985, when he died in a plane crash; outside Japan, however, he was a one-hit wonder.[9]

Several points deserve comment.

Sakamoto's song, in the United States and elsewhere, was released in the Japanese original, with Japanese lyrics, at a time when, a mere eighteen years after the end of World War II, many people of East Asian descent in the United States were still regularly confronted with the racially tinged slogan "Remember Pearl Harbor!" The song was also composed in the Japanese pentatonic scale; it was certainly not a composition that would have been expected to resonate with American and European youths. Furthermore, neither the Japanese government nor Sakamoto's Japanese producers made any systematic efforts to export the song. Thus the song, at least as an export, faced three obstacles from the outset.

It is possible, however, to explain those obstacles away.

For one thing, eighteen years is a long time—in fact, it was more than an entire lifetime for many of the teenagers who constituted Sakamoto's principal fan base around the world. For another, despite the song's exotic scale, Sakamoto himself was steeped in contemporary American popular music, being an avid fan and imitator of Elvis Presley. Indeed, he made his initial reputation in Japan as a rockabilly performer, and his Presley-like articulation rendered his words all but incomprehensible; to some Japanese listeners, he almost sounded not Japanese at all.[10] In addition, Sakamoto's melismatic singing, replete with falsetto phrases, made the tune at once familiar and strange to Japanese and non-Japanese listeners alike. Another significant point is that his singing, though marred by uncertain pitch, is remarkably rhythmic—an unusual characteristic in Japan at the time, but very much the norm in American popular music. But the non-Japanese constitution of "Sukiyaki" goes beyond Sakamoto's rhythmic singing and his emulation of Presley. He was, to recall a popular expression of the era, "in the groove."[11] And, as mentioned earlier, African American musical genres have often employed the pentatonic scale.[12] Thus, by the early 1960s, the mainstream's acceptance of black music, however qualified, may have set the stage for "Sukiyaki" to fall within the listening competence of American music fans, and the pentatonic scale may have added a touch of exoticism, in the form of the song's perceived melancholic melody. Finally, the culture industry, powerful though its influence can be, does not dictate taste; within the broad parameters of recognizably popular music, many genres and styles have succeeded, but there are no sure-fire formulas for acclaim and fame. The fact that the lyrics of Sakamoto's song were indecipherable did little to diminish listeners' enjoyment of its upbeat yet melancholic melody.[13] A catchy tune may have its logic, of which logic knows nothing.

In the end, however, we can explain only so much without courting the risk of explaining everything, and therefore nothing. Just as Psy's 2012 hit resists simplistic explanations of its rapid dissemination and enthusiastic reception (surely no K-pop producer would have expected such a level of

breakaway success in the United States for Psy, widely perceived as looking less like a K-pop star than like a *ssirŭm* [Korean sumo] wrestler), Sakamoto's global hit remains mysterious at one level, something of a secular miracle. It is easy enough to reconstruct what happened. The tune, which had at best modest expectations, was used as the theme song for a Japanese television drama and became the first television-based hit song in Japan in 1961.[14] Thereafter, an American DJ received the single from a friend, played it on his radio show, and received an enthusiastic response. Capitol Records then promoted the song, Sakamoto made a triumphant appearance on a popular variety program, *The Steve Allen Show,* and success begat more success.[15] Yet this narrative still does not explain the song's enthusiastic reception. We know that neither the lyricist nor the composer—or, for that matter, the singer himself—thought that the song would be a hit even in Japan, much less around the world.[16] As the US producer Dave Dexter Jr. has recounted, "I figured the chances [against] Sakamoto's unintelligible vocal becoming a success to be somewhat more than a jillion to one."[17]

Fame has always been thus. As Aristotle put it in *Magna Moralia,* "Good fortune . . . is nature without reason."[18] Riches and fame, popularity and stardom, unlike a composer's creative conception or a singer's dynamic execution, are beyond individual or even collective control and therefore reside in the realm of *fortuna.* A global hit presupposes social and technological preconditions, but these, like a narrative, do not constitute a cogent explanation. Perhaps we can use statistical parameters and trends to show a certain frequency of megahits or videos that go viral, but in the context of complexity and other contingencies, any chain of consequences is soon likely to reach the limits of what can be predicted and is therefore unlikely to provide the basis of a concise and cogent explanation. It is interesting that Aristotle was wrong on almost everything about nature, but the same cannot be said for his astute insights into human affairs. At the same time, we will never know what he would have made of "Gangnam Style" or Girls' Generation.

Sakamoto, incidentally, was most likely Zainichi, an ethnic Korean born into an extremely impoverished family in Japan. Early on, he fell deeply in love with American popular music, through a neighboring US military camp and its entertainment annexes.[19] In spite of his disadvantaged upbringing, his singing radiates happiness; he always performed with a smile and a certain joie de vivre. It is surely not a stretch of the imagination to think that listeners far away heard in his irrepressibly upbeat, earnest, enthusiastic voice—though it harbored a dark melancholic undertone—the soothing melody of music's manifold joy.