

**PRIESTS, PIRATES, OPERA SINGERS, AND SLAVES:
SÉGA AND EUROPEAN ART MUSIC IN MAURITIUS,
“THE LITTLE PARIS OF THE INDIAN OCEAN”**

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation comprises a musical history and ethnography of musical culture on the island of Mauritius in the southern Indian Ocean. It details two interrelated performance traditions, examining the history and practice of European art music on the island in parallel with that of an endemic song-and-dance tradition called *séga*. Mauritius, once a notorious nest of pirates and privateers, was a famous overseas haven of French culture during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Wealth from trade, war, and piracy fueled a rich cultural scene that featured the latest music from Western Europe. Visitors to “The Little Paris of the Indian Ocean” also encountered *séga*, a percussion-driven music based on improvised songs and dances that developed amongst the island’s African and Malagasy slaves. Today, *séga* is an integral part of the Mauritian tourism industry and is prominently featured in government cultural and educational programs.

The general format of the dissertation is a musical history of Mauritius from its first human settlement in 1638 to the present day. It draws extensively on unpublished archival documents and on travelogues, letters, and diaries from visitors to provide

specific details about the extent and nature of musical practice in Mauritius. It is also informed by historical newspapers, contemporaneous literature, and by recent discoveries in Mauritian archaeology. The narrative of the past half-century of Mauritian musical and cultural history takes the form of a musical ethnography and draws upon numerous interviews and on field research conducted in Mauritius from 2011-2012. The dissertation also includes a detailed study of music in contemporary Mauritian society, with special reference to the use of *séga* in nation-building policies, identity politics, the tourism industry, and in public education.