

Pomona's Alma Mater Stirs Strong Feelings

Nearing 100 years old, the College's alma mater, "Hail, Pomona, Hail," stirs strong feelings, as witnessed by the controversy currently surrounding the song. The issue arose not over the lyrics, but over the circumstances surrounding the alma mater's origin.

Last February, fliers were posted around campus pointing out that the song was first performed as part of a blackface minstrel show held at Pomona during the 1909-10 school year. This fact had been previously published but was news to many, including current students. President David W. Oxtoby invited concerned students to meet with him, and he was moved by their concerns that the song's past might be felt as a legacy of exclusion.

After consulting with students, with alumni on faculty and staff and with the Board of Trustees, Oxtoby



FROM THE 1914 POMONA COLLEGE SONG BOOK

decided to temporarily remove the song from the program of official events such as Alumni Weekend and Commencement, a breather designed to allow a committee to delve into its history and discuss "how we can best continue our long tradition of celebrating the College in song." Comprised of alumni of many eras, current students, faculty and trustees, the Committee on College Songs is to report back to Oxtoby with recommendations by the end of 2008.

In the meantime, many alumni have written to express their love for the song; others have written to reflect on the problem or to suggest a change. Even *The New York Times* got involved when someone posed the question to a column known as *The Ethicist*. What follows is a sampling of the many letters received by the committee, Oxtoby and PCM. —MK

It is unfortunate that there was a time when minstrel show humor was an acceptable form of entertainment on the Pomona College campus. As I understand it, however, the song we now call our alma mater was not written as an integral part of the show in question. That is, it didn't support or further the specifics of the blackface antics. The structure of these shows came in the format known as olio. That is, various scenes, songs, and skits were presented, each with little or no connection to what had come before. In essence, the song was written contemporaneously to the sketches, and its association with the disrespectful divertissement was merely coincidental. Did the show inspire the song? I doubt it. The very fact that this discussion is being held is a testament to our institution's desire to fulfill its mission. Please keep the song as an enduring expression of our love for Pomona and the ideals it represents.

—Jim Lunsford '78

"Hail, Pomona, Hail" has for 42 years made me feel all warm and fuzzy. Now that I learn from David Oxtoby's letter that it may have hurtful associations for some in the community, I won't hear it again in the same way. A disquieting thought will creep into my mind whenever I hear it, and my warm and fuzzy thoughts will be conflicted. ... I'm not one for revisionist views of history in many contexts, but it seems to me that the thoughtful and reverent thing to do is, start over.

—Steve Gettinger '70

As a Black woman who graduated from Pomona in 1975, I am not troubled by the song's origin. I confess I do not remember the lyrics of the song, but unless they themselves are offensive, the song should continue to be sung. Once you start going back in time to right wrongs, how far do you go? Which wrongs do you right? Jefferson did not have me in mind when he wrote "all men are created equal." My grandfather's grandfather was a slave. And yet, I am fully American. We are evolving as a nation and the best we can do is to be just in our own time.

—Glenda Armand Sheppard '75

Just as I had feared, political correctness is threatening to despoil a cherished memory and a wonderful college tradition. For many of us, over 50 years removed from graduation, while memories grow muted, the melodies linger on as we replay the old songs. Please don't remove, or modify this key song. There are no offensive lyrics in our alma mater. Giving in to pettiness will, no doubt, lead the endangerment of other traditions.

—Merv Nerling '51

As a third generation graduate of Pomona, the 34th of my family to attend, I was horrified to read the letter from President Oxtoby. I find it depressing that some folks find so little of real importance to think about that they consider the origin of a melody to be worth this sort of fuss. No item of entertainment written 100 years ago should have any imme-

diated impact on today's culture or attitude. Times were so different then. We cannot change what was then, only appreciate how much attitudes have changed since then. Many, many of the songs and hymns we sing use melodies of questionable origin, including our national anthem. Surely the words, thoughts and emotions expressed are of much more import than where the tune came from. And the words in 'Hail, Pomona, Hail' surely offer no insult or offense to any group. I learned the alma mater long before I entered Pomona, as I came with my parents, Mary and Garth Hinds '28, to Alumni Day every year. Even still, when I sing it, or play it on the piano as I sometimes do, I tear up. For my generation, it has great meaning and impact, as it should for current students, too.

—Eleanor McFadden Hinds Plamondon '51

For the past 27 years, I have taught music history at Manhattan School of Music in New York City. Every other year, I teach a course on American music.

Much of the consternation surrounding the alma mater is its association with a student minstrel show in 1909. As many of you know, the American minstrel show, also called the Ethiopian show, was extremely popular in all parts of the United States. ... As much as we should rightly decry the racist attitude of the old minstrel shows, which I lament as do others, there was an important and positive side to the influence of the Ethiopian shows. In a real and progressive way, the minstrel show

helped bring together the musical traditions of Black and White America. The music opened the ears of European-American composers to aspects of melody and rhythm and performance practice typical of the African tradition.

... The popularity of the minstrel show engendered a demand throughout the United States that led to the subsequent development of jazz, vaudeville, musical comedy, concert music and even collegiate glee clubs.

"Hail, Pomona, Hail" has neither text nor tune that are racist. For anyone who is offended by the original "context" of the song's premiere in 1909, I hope that they will understand more fully the musical and historical context of the song rather than simply react to the past. I hope that Pomona's sons and daughters may continue to sing "Hail, Pomona, Hail."

—David Noon '68

Like a national anthem, an alma mater is constitutive of identity and articulates who is a member of the community and who is excluded. A song "speaks" in four ways: in the lyrics; in the music itself; in the context in which it was written, performed, and sung; and in the silences (what is not included in either words or music). The lyrics and the music of "Hail, Pomona, Hail" are not problematic—nor are they interesting. Context is the problem. The song's connection to the minstrel show is offensive. ... The silences in the song, though, reveal opportunity. "Hail, Pomona, Hail" says nothing about what it means to be a Sagehen. Imagine, instead, an inclusive, community-building alma mater reminding us to be "eager, thoughtful, and reverent" and to "bear [our] added riches in trust for mankind." Let's eliminate the racist taint with a new song or at least with new lyrics. Let's take this opportunity to create a truly inspiring alma mater.

—Renée Marlin-Bennett '81

Thank you for your thoughtful and reasoned letter regarding the Pomona Alma Mater. I was quite saddened to read about the discovery of its tainted past. I sang in the Glee Clubs when I was at Pomona and loved that

From *The New York Times*, August 10, 2008
The Ethicist: Randy Cohen

The Heart of the Alma Mater

A college with which I am affiliated discovered that its alma mater was written for a blackface minstrel show in the 1900s. Although the lyrics are innocuous, the school banned the song from this year's graduation and formed a group to discuss its future use, part of a campaign to make students aware of things they take for granted. Is this a good response, or should the school focus on more important issues? Is it unethical to sing the song? —Julia Deiuliis [CMC '07], Philadelphia

Sing out—full-throated, clear-conscience. I would be reluctant to intone words that might wound, particularly my fellow students, particularly at graduation, an event they should enjoy unambivalently. (Save for the mounting terror of repaying their massive student debt.) But if, as you note, the lyrics of this alma mater are benign ("Hail to thee . . ." and the like), then dubious origins need not force the college to abjure it. "Oh! Susanna," the first song for which Stephen Foster received a cash payment (two crisp \$50 bills), the one that started his career, was first performed in minstrel shows, but that is no reason to purge it from the summer-camp repertory.

Much in our culture has evolved beyond its origins. To shake hands once demonstrated that you did not hold a sword, but to extend your hand today does not imply that you suspect another is armed. There are words we use in polite society despite their murky birth: "philistine," for example, was a sort of ethnic slur. If the alma mater currently carries no toxic connotations, you need not eschew it.

The school's response is not only ethical but also admirable. It did what a college should: cultivate in its students an alertness to the historical origins and cultural implications of things around them. This particular project may be evaluated for its efficacy — does it achieve this worthy goal? — but should still be praised for its intent. And if from time to time such activities drift toward minor matters, that need not prevent the school from tackling more significant issues. The persistence of murder does not compel us to ignore burglary.

—Reprinted with permission of *The New York Times*

song! It filled my heart to overflowing with pride and emotion. If it were to be discontinued and replaced by another, I would be doubly sad. I understand fully that some in the community are hurt by its past, and I understand fully why. However, the song represents almost 100 years of proud college history that has moved beyond those times. To come up with a new alma mater would perhaps cleanse everyone's conscience, but it would tear a hole in Pomona's traditions. I urge the college community to find a way to retain the song while acknowledging its origins.

—Dinah Dodds '64

First, let me commend you for bringing the matter of "Hail, Pomona, Hail" to the attention of all who are affiliated with the college. That was the right thing to do. Second, let me urge you, as the dust settles, to give priority to hearing the voices of those to whom the history of this song brings pain. In matters such as this, it is not up to the majority to decide what is or is not hurtful to the minori-

ty. Rather, it is up to the majority to hear and honor the pain expressed by the minority. Yes, I will be sad to see our alma mater go. But, now that this information has come out, I would never sing the song again anyway.

—Phil Sakimoto '76

"Hail, Pomona, Hail" is a perfect alma mater that never fails to bring tears to my eyes at reunions. It is completely devoid of social and political content, and is even "gender-inclusive" ("sons and daughters sing"). ...

What a classic example of the grievance industry stirring up a teapot-tempest and then getting its kicks by watching guilt-ridden white liberals grovel! Basically, our Alma Mater stands accused of dripping with "racist hate" because it shared center stage with a "minstrel show" (which would certainly be highly offensive and completely unacceptable by today's standards). But this was in the long-dead consciousness of a century ago; not only those social mores but everyone who thought up and performed in that show are long dead also. I'm sure every college that has been around since the 1800s is full of similar embarrassments. Let the past bury its dead, deal with it, and move on. ...

I love Pomona. If I didn't, I wouldn't react so strongly to a song.

—Robert C. Michael '66

First, as a former member and president of the Pomona College Men's Blue and White, I know the importance of tradition at Pomona College. ... During alumni weekend, we have former members of the group come up and sing with us. When 2056 rolls around for my 50th reunion, I want to be able to come up and sing the alma mater with the Men's Blue and White too.

Second, the intent and the impact of the song must be differentiated. The impact of the song is clearly hurtful to some, and that needs to be recognized and addressed. But the intent of the song is by no means malicious, certainly not in its present form. So, while we should acknowledge the feelings of those upset by the song, there is no justifiable reason to ban the song completely.

—Seth Kadish '06