The Lindsey Stirling Effect

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Mormon Celebrity, Mormon Normalcy, and the Dress

We will get to the violin playing. First, let's talk about the dress. On May 17, 2015, the Mormon blogosphere erupted into controversy over the designer gown worn by dancing violinist and YouTube star Lindsey Stirling to the Billboard Music Awards show, where she was to receive the Top Dance/Electronic Album honor. Much of her fan base was torn. Her charm, her quirky fiddle-prancing shtick, and her unapologetic LDS religiosity had made her one of the most eminently Facebookable Mormons in an era in which LDS members have been encouraged quite specifically over the pulpit to share their faith online. And yet there she was, posing for the press in a form-fitting dress with slinky black crisscross straps that framed far too many windowpanes of flesh. "You were a role model until you publicly shamed your religion," one Instagram commenter lamented.[1] Was Stirling flouting—or had she somehow missed—the continued ecclesiastical admonishment and consequent orthodox eagerness, now several years running, to cover the skin from shoulder to knee?

On the other hand, some less conservative voices, many of which, I suspect, do not regularly ride on the same social media bandwagons as do Stirling's fans, leapt to defend her autonomy over her own body and its public presentation and, explicitly or implicitly, enlist the incident in an ongoing critique of Mormon modesty culture's obsession with surface and assumption of the "male gaze."[2] Stirling herself proposed an odd and logically limber defense: "The dress I wore to the awards was fully lined with tan fabric. But after looking at the pictures, I see that you actually can't tell that it's lined. In hind sight [sic] it wasn't the best choice

because modesty is important to me."[3] Some echoed this cognitively dissonant tack. Megan Gee, a fashion video blogger and student at Brigham Young University–Idaho, encountered a number of students who were perplexed by the dress, including one who felt "like it's kind of misleading a little bit *because you can't tell if it's modest or not*" (emphasis added).[4] Yes, the dress *looked* provocative, but was it *technically* "modest" because the open parts were lined with skin-colored fabric? Does counterfeit immodesty contain a self-cancelling double negative that leaves you with modesty? If Stirling had made a mistake, some fans opined, it was not so much in wearing the dress but in somehow not conveying the fact that the dress was revealing skin-colored fabric, not actual skin. Stirling's was an awkward concession and one delivered with regret that the dress and its wearer had been met with such judgmental hostility.[5]

Though seemingly a triviality, the dress incident shows how dramatically a rising Mormon celebrity can project and magnify certain twenty-first-century Mormon cultural tensions. On the one hand, as J. B. Haws has observed, "Mormons seem intrigued, sometimes to the point of obsession, with those in their ranks who achieve celebrity" because seeing such individuals in the public eye "contributes measurably in the quest to demonstrate, in President Hinckley's words, that Mormons 'are not a weird people.'"[6] On the other hand, however, an increasingly variegated American culture makes Mormonism's hard-fought normalcy itself seem weird. That's how we arrive at such a strange internal dialogue: *Yay, there's a Mormon on the red carpet! We're normal! But she's wearing an immodest dress! We don't want* that *kind of normal! Oh, whew, it's lined with skin-tone fabric—modest* and *normal!* Those tensions between normal and boring, between different and devious, are ever-present in American culture but exacerbated in Mormon culture. They are, in fact, the very strings Lindsey Stirling has played to internet stardom.

The Artist as Artistic Development Breakthrough Story

The first sentence of Stirling's online bio is telling. It does not say "Lindsey Stirling is a violinist," or "Lindsey Stirling is a dancing

violinist," or even "Lindsey Stirling is a musician." In fact, it doesn't even say that she's a human. It identifies her as a media product: "Lindsey Stirling is one of the biggest artist development breakthrough stories in recent years."[7] It should come as no surprise, then, that when she graduated from Brigham Young University in August of 2015, she performed at the business school's convocation (her degree is in recreation management), not at the Harris Fine Arts Center. Her story is about media and marketing and business and technology as much as it is about music. She rose to fame on and through the internet, which means that even though her musical projects have sold impressively (her website boasts that her self-titled debut album sold 350,000 copies and did so without the marketing support of a record label; her follow-up album of original music from 2014, *Shatter Me*, debuted at #2 on the Billboard charts), her music is not just consumed *as music*. It is, to an extent greater than most artists, part of a larger, sprawling, evolving, multimedia story involving visual presentation, stylistic allusion, fan culture/cosplay, and compelling biographical narrative. Her public perception is something like a brand, but one in which the labels and genre-markers and search-engine keywords, the bios and the peeks-behind-the-scenes, have become intrinsic rather than ancillary to the ostensible musical product itself. The music she makes is stylistically indistinct: it leaves plenty of room for everything else, such that her story and identity have become entangled with the musical "text." This is not uncommon in and of itself—"artist development" is an established industry concept. Media companies make it their business to develop an artist's image in this way to some extent in order to cultivate fan loyalty and increase revenue. As fan culture scholar Mark Duffett explains, "[S]ome music fans have textual objects (the song, the album, the genre), but there are many others who have become fascinated with a particular individual or group (the star, the band); in some senses the distinction itself is debatable because musical texts and their makers have inevitably become confused."[8]

What is remarkable about Lindsey Stirling is the discernment (perhaps leavened by luck) with which she has pursued that process independently. Rather than doing what independent artists often

claim or aspire to do—namely, eschew the heavy homogenizing hand of record labels and their "development" teams—she has ingeniously used emerging technological and social trends to take over that job. She has successfully commercialized her self herself.

Stirling was born in Santa Ana, California, to parents of such limited financial means that they purportedly had to find a violin teacher willing to give five-year-old Lindsey fifteen-minute lessons instead of the beginner's standard half-hour.[9] The family eventually moved to Gilbert, Arizona, where Lindsey played violin in her high school rock band, Stomp on Melvin, and parlayed her pop-violin style into a first-place finish in the 2005 Arizona Junior Miss competition. After a year at BYU, Stirling served a mission in New York City, then returned to BYU and began developing her career in earnest. Her first shot at stardom occurred in 2010, but it fell short: after a promising debut on the NBC variety show *America's Got Talent*, she was eliminated at the quarter-final stage with pointed criticism from the judges. Her approach took a different tack when in 2011 she accepted an offer from BYU film student Devin Graham to film a video for her original track "Spontaneous Me." Shortly after the video was posted online, her web traffic and sales increased by an order of magnitude and her subsequent self-titled album of original music saw remarkable sales. Additional videos, sometimes produced at a breakneck pace, expanded her fan base further; at the time of this writing, her YouTube channel boasts more than seven million subscribers and some six dozen videos that together have garnered over a billion total views.

Stirling's 2011 breakout correlates roughly to a period of dramatic change in media history. As media scholars Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green observe, the end of the twenty-first century's first decade saw a shift from broadcasting-based "distribution" to social-media driven "spreadability." They take as an introductory case study of this phenomenon

the overnight stardom of Scottish singer Susan Boyle. A decidedly un-glamourous, middle-aged woman whose public singing experience had mainly consisted of church choir and karaoke, Boyle became famous after giving an unexpectedly stirring performance of "I Dreamed a Dream" from *Les Misérables* during her 2009 appearance on the television contest show *Britain's Got Talent*. Fans loved her voice but also fell in love with her glum-to-glamorous story; the editors of the show set up the audience for surprise in the introduction by emphasizing her frumpy awkwardness, then shocked them with her unexpected vocal skill and expressive fervor.

Although Boyle's initial public introduction came from a slickly-packaged professional television show designed for broadcast, Jenkins, et al., argue that "Boyle's international success was not driven by broadcast distribution. Fans found Susan Boyle before media outlets did. The most popular Susan Boyle YouTube video [of her televised debut] reached 2.5 million views in the first 72 hours and drew 103 million views on 20 different websites within the first nine days of its release."[10] Boyle's success was owed initially to her television appearance, but the remarkable spread of the clip across the globe resulted from the tech savviness of her fans, who by 2009 had developed the technical skills necessary to transfer the video onto various online platforms and share it via social media networks. More importantly, Jenkins, et al., argue, she became famous because of the *social* aspect of those social networks: "The Susan Boyle phenomenon would not have played out in the same way if not for the relationships and communities facilitated by social network sites, media sharing tools, and microblogging platforms."[11]

Lindsey Stirling quickly acclimated to this new media terrain governed more by "spread" than "broadcast." Moreover, she leveraged her religious community's unusual status within that new environment. Even prior to the ubiquity of Facebook and YouTube, Mormon tribalism had given a boost, via the "social media" of the call-in vote, to LDS artists competing on *American Idol* and the like.[12] And as long-time early adopters of communication technologies, Mormons in the US at the turn of the millennium

owned more computers and had more internet connectivity per capita than most other Americans.[13] Consequently, during the subsequent decade, they likewise embraced social media and actively enlisted it for religious expression and virtual congregation—what Benjamin Burroughs calls "techno-faith."[14] This combination of cultural solidarity and technological sophistication among LDS consumers positioned Stirling not only to take advantage of the emerging technological opportunities available to independent artists through viral media but also to use a friendly and tech-savvy community of co-congregants as a social media launching pad.

Stirling's internet fame and her Mormon identity soon developed a symbiotic relationship. She appeared in a popular video profile for the "I'm a Mormon" campaign in which she shares her faith and talents and also divulges her struggles with an eating disorder. She also appeared in the second installment of the Church's "Face to Face" live broadcasts for youth.[15] Such invitations to share her story in Church-sponsored media presumably solidified her LDS base while her rising fame lent more celebrity cachet to her Church media appearances. This is not to say that her contributions to proselytizing or public relations efforts were driven by commercial ambitions. Many faithful Mormons in the public eye seek to sincerely consecrate their fame in some way. But the presence of Mormonism in her story is inevitably connected to the impact of Mormonism on her media strategy. A famous Mormon cannot help but be aware of the influence her religious identity exerts on her audience reach, and vice versa. Lindsey Stirling either consciously sensed or stumbled upon the potent compound brewing among digital media, musical genre-bending, and Mormonism. It would not be inaccurate to say that Lindsey Stirling's primary instrument, and her real area of virtuosity, is YouTube.

The Mix Is the Message

Stirling's audience appeal—generally, and with Mormons specifically—owes, in part, to her fluency in what have become the lingua franca of the social web: hybrids, genre crossovers, and mashups.

When Stirling first landed in the national spotlight in 2010 on *America's Got Talent*, judge Piers Morgan initially identified this as a key to her appeal: "What I like about Lindsey is that she combines a traditional instrument with a very modern flavor kind of routine. And that's exciting!" Stirling's approach to the crossover doesn't rely on combining multiple artistic proficiencies—in fact, it doesn't really even rely on proficiency as an underlying assumption. It relies on highlighting and exaggerating the point of intersection and the act of intersecting. It relies not just on novelty or newness but a particular kind of newness: an exhilaration that comes from the perception of stylistic transgression. Not only are two things put together that normally aren't put together, there's a vague sense that they *shouldn't* be put together.

Stirling's approach to the crossover concept is slippery and strange. It focuses not on the elements being combined so much as the act of combining them; to borrow from McLuhan, the mix *is* the message. Stirling makes this plain with the fact that her identity—her story—has consistently emphasized the multiplicities of her media while changing the ingredients being combined and/or the emphases placed on them. Most obviously and consistently, she plays the violin and dances. There's a certain basic carnivalesque novelty to this: she does two things that are both physically difficult, and when done at the same time the execution of each ostensibly increases the difficulty of the execution of the other. This also implicitly lowers the expectation of virtuosity for both; to adapt the old circus adage, it's not *how well* the violinist dances, it's *that* the violinist dances. She doesn't do Balanchine with her feet and Brahms with her fingers; rather, she plays a visually busy but technically uncomplicated style of pop-fiddling while prancing, spinning, swaying, lurching, posing, shifting her weight, and kicking—often not so much dancing as simply exaggerating the expressive kinetics of a typical violinist, or a stage-roaming pop musician, or a mime. The music-plus-dance combination is compounded by Stirling's highly stylized evocation of genre. She has alternately worn the label "hip-hop violinist" and "dubstep violinist," and her promotional copy and her music-industry accolades both emphasize her reputation as a "crossover" artist.

Her online bio is clearly crafted for keyword inclusion and search engine optimization. She's both "electronic" and "classical." A "ballerina" and a "rave fairy."

There is something particularly appealing to Mormons about crossovers and mashups. They speak in a subtle way to the long-standing Mormon desire to be perceived as normal, but normal *today*, in a world in which the previous patterns of normalcy to which Mormons aspired for much of the twentieth century—namely, the normalcy of the stereotypical white, American, suburban, 1950s nuclear family—are now seen as abnormally homogeneous and conformist. In other words, Mormons don't just feel the need to let loose, they seek collective social capital through the public performance of their abilities to let loose. The challenge is that Mormons must find ways to do so in a manner that does not threaten their adherence to religious standards. Stirling herself said this more or less in the video montage introduction to her 2010 *America's Got Talent* audition: "Being a hip-hop violinist is kind of out of the ordinary. . . . A lot of people are really surprised when they hear that I'm Mormon and that I do hip-hop violin. I want to stand for the fact that I haven't compromised any of my values, and you can be what you want to be and you can stand for everything you want to be at the same time."

This embodies a paradox of Mormon identity: the very acts that offer the safe, low-level exhilaration of normalcy-deviation and boundary-transgression are the ones that Mormons also offer up as evidence of Mormon normalcy within an eclectic, diverse cultural landscape. Crossing boundaries—specifically, articulating and then transgressing them—is a way of conforming to non-conformism through religiously non-incriminating behavior.[16] To put it more concisely: genre-bending paradoxically says, "We're wild and crazy! Just like everyone else!" Perhaps this is why Stirling is not alone among Mormon media figures in choosing the crossover as her medium. The Piano Guys, a group from St. George, Utah, likewise found rapid internet success during the same period with their combination of cello and piano in "classical crossover" arrangements and high-art/low-art mashups presented on YouTube with clever and cinematically sophisticated music

videos. (Their videographer is actually credited as a member of the ensemble.) Alex Boyé, a Mormon convert from London with Nigerian ancestry, has garnered millions of YouTube views by producing "Africanized" covers of pop hits by Lorde, Bruno Mars, and many others, including a collaboration with The Piano Guys on a cover of Coldplay's "Paradise."[17]

The paradox manifested in Mormon genre-mixing is a local refraction of a larger aspect of mashup culture: its reliance on a strange, collective amnesia. In order for some stylistic combination to seem new and fresh, it depends on listeners' forgetfulness or ignorance of earlier hybrids. It relies on audiences' maintaining a sense of transgressiveness in boundary-crossing, even though those boundaries are crossed all the time. In fact, arguably, from a music-historical standpoint, crossing genre boundaries is so common as to be one of the principal forces in musical development across recorded world history. Early Christian chant borrowed from Jewish cantillation. The crusaders returned with musical souvenirs and left mashup liturgical music behind. Two centuries before the word "mashup" existed, during the rule of the English East India Company over the Indian subcontinent, Muthuswami Dikshitar, the eighteenth-century Carnatic master musician, wrote a Sanskrit song based on "God Save the King." The bass drum and cymbals initially found their way into the Western orchestra from the Janissary bands of the Turkish military. Gershwin combined jazz and classical. George Harrison learned the sitar. Taylor Swift started out country. Mashup is how music works.

Crossover culture is nothing new. Except for a few rare isolationist examples, "crossover culture" is simply a forgetful way of saying "culture." But in the twenty-first century, the proliferation and inter-combination of genres and styles have accelerated alongside technological advances. The age of YouTube has brought us The Cherry Coke$, a Japanese Celtic punk band; a Muslim tween girl in hijab playing heavy metal riffs on an electric guitar; and ukulele covers of dance club hits. Not only is any combination possible, it seems that every combination, sooner or later, is inevitable: *of course* there's a Japanese Celtic punk band, or indigenous Australian pop, or a heavy metal band

inspired by the Ned Flanders character on *The Simpsons*, given enough time and bandwidth.

The violin is one of the most frequent boundary crossers. The notion that it is "native" to the classical world, and that taking it out of that world is somehow unusual, results from quite recent and indeterminate associations in the popular mind of "classical" with "fancy": the violin, as a stand-in for European classical music generally, evokes a caricature of Western upper class. But its origins trace to Asian spike fiddles, and its diasporic branches spread from Irish pubs to Athabaskan lodges. Baluswami Dikshitar, the brother of the aforementioned nineteenth-century Carnatic cosmopolitan, borrowed the European violin from colonial British ensembles and made it a staple of the South Indian canon. The violin had been around the block a few times before anyone rigged it with a pickup and played it over a drum machine.

But just as the pace of stylistic crossovers and mashup matchups has accelerated, so too has our ability to miss or forget, in the proliferation of possibilities, which combinations have already been tried. Mashup culture doesn't reward the new, it rewards the new-to-you. The secret is not to find something innovative, necessarily, but to find an audience for whom it seems so. This is where Lindsey Stirling excels. She has managed to make a career and garner an enormous online following using a concept that had actually already played out in demographic circles beyond her own and those of most of her fans. The moniker "hip-hop violinist" had already been coined in the early 2000s by Miri Ben-Ari, an Israeli-born violinist with classical and jazz training.[18] Ben-Ari had already collaborated with a number of popular artists by the time she released her debut album, *The Hip-Hop Violinist*, with Universal Records in 2005. The album's featured guest artists include such prominent hip-hop figures as Akon, Lil Wayne, Fatman Scoop, Doug E. Fresh, and Kanye West. That same year, Ben-Ari won a Grammy for Best Rap Song for the hit she co-wrote with West, "Jesus Walks."

Five years later, Lindsey Stirling sent a video to *The Ellen DeGeneres Show* in hopes of landing an appearance. According to Stirling, it was a member of DeGeneres's team who first pitched

the idea of hip-hop violin. "[O]ne of their producers called me back and said I bet I could get you on the show if you did hip hop. So I wrote my first hip hop song and I upped my dance moves." Stirling took the idea to heart, even though an invitation to perform on Ellen's show never materialized.[19] The resultant audition video ended up gaining enough internet attention to lead to her 2010 appearance on *America's Got Talent*, where she introduced herself with her mashup persona: "I'm Lindsey Stirling. I'm from Utah. And I play hip-hop violin."

The announcer kept up the theme when she advanced to the quarter-finals: "Here are three words you don't often hear in the same sentence: hip-hop violinist."[20] Stirling's use of the term is curious, particularly compared to Ben-Ari. Whereas Ben-Ari collaborated with a number of actual established hip-hop artists and eventually won a hip-hop Grammy, Stirling's music borrows only the most basic and indistinct hints of actual hip-hop. It uses electronic drums and some electronic synthesizer sounds that might be found in certain kinds of hip-hop music (though not exclusively), and it might seem vaguely urban to a suburban audience. But for the most part, it lacks the musical earmarks of hip-hop such as rapping or turntable scratching. It no more sounds like hip-hop than "Book of Mormon Stories" sounds Native American.

Of course, genre authenticity holds less of a premium for YouTube audiences than near-range novelty. But just as mashup culture rewards audience amnesia or isolation, it penalizes audience memory and awareness: the appeal of any particular crossover has a limited shelf life with the same crowd. Before Stirling's quarter-final appearance, contest judge Howie Mandel warned: "I think what she does is different. That being said, [the] two times that I've seen her have not been different from each other. She has to be different tonight." Her performance, in teased hair, nerd glasses, and schoolgirl stockings, was energetic but too sloppy to be saved by stylistic eclecticism. Afterwards, judge Piers Morgan denigrated her playing, complaining that she missed too many notes and that she wasn't good enough to pull off both movement and music without sounding like "rats being strangled." Stirling responded somewhat sheepishly: "I've never headlined before,

I've never done my own hip-hop music so this is completely new for me." What's most interesting is how, when pressed by Morgan about the plausibility of her act and her inability to play well while dancing, Stirling pivoted to the question of genre: the "hip-hop violinist" admitted to having never previously created any hip-hop music. The label was an affect, no less pretended and stylized than her costume. She disregarded entirely the issue of her violin abilities. (As will I, for now.)

Fantasy and Fan Culture

In the story of Stirling's rise to internet stardom, her losing performance on *America's Got Talent* would become the "I'll show them" moment. Stirling soon discovered that the appeal of genre-bending doesn't just fall across boundaries between musical styles but also across music and other media. To a certain extent this had been part of her story all along: before she was the hip-hop violinist, she was the dancing violinist. Something or other had always been crossing-over. The hybridizing aesthetic simply compounded when musical genre—particularly one with as much demographic potency as "hip-hop"—was added to the mix. But what ultimately proved key to Stirling's viral stardom was her decision to apply her mashup approach to draw in other audiences attached to genres not specific to music: video game, fantasy, and cosplay cultures.

One of Stirling's biggest early YouTube hits was her medley of Koji Kondo's themes from Nintendo's popular *Zelda* video game series. The timing of the video's premiere on YouTube deliberately coincided with Nintendo's November 2011 release of a new game for the Wii system, *The Legend of Zelda: Skyward Sword*. In the video, Stirling performs the piece while dancing through forests and meadows dressed as the game's protagonist, Link, in tights and pointy hat and with a quiver of arrows on her back. The success of that video made it clear that this was a lucrative audience to pursue. Subsequent videos featured themed costumes and thematic medleys from the video games *SkyRim*, *Pokémon*, *Assassin's Creed III*, *Halo*, and *Child of Light*.[21]

Many of Stirling's videos target other specific groups with devoted fan cultures, including musical theater (*Phantom of the Opera*, *Les Misérables*), the George R. R. Martin/HBO fantasy series *Game of Thrones*, several movie score spinoffs (including a *Lord of the Rings* medley and a *Mission Impossible* video with The Piano Guys), and a cappella (including two projects with YouTube a cappella stars Pentatonix). She has also performed and spoken at cosplay events, where ardent fans of comic books, video games, and fantasy films gather to discuss their passions and admire each other's character costumes. In an interview with Larry King in December of 2012, Stirling spoke matter-of-factly about how consciously she cultivates her fan base by taking requests for fantasy/video game/cosplay ideas.[22] Her formula has become so established that it recently inspired a parody by BYU's sketch comedy television series, *Studio C*, in which Stirling's fictional sister "Leila" clumsily attempts to prance through the forest wearing an elf costume and playing a sousaphone.[23]

Moreover, Stirling herself projects a kind of cosplay image, regardless of costume. Her petite frame and large eyes, particularly when complemented by her characteristic oversized back-combed hair and pigtails, evoke the exaggerated physiology of an anime character. In fact, Sharon Osbourne, the third judge on *America's Got Talent*, made exactly this observation: "Lindsey, you're here because you're unique, and we loved you at the audition . . . *you remind me of a little cartoon character. That's what you remind me of.*" Fittingly, one of her most popular covers is a realization of "Senbonzakura," originally sung by Hatsune Miku, a virtual holographic pop star with a digitally-generated voice.

In another truly post-modern move, Stirling has caricaturized fan culture by spoofing her own fans. Her YouTube channel features a handful of videos starring "Phelba," a character played by Stirling herself with little to no effort at disguise. Phelba is Lindsey, but simply out of costume and with feigned social awkwardness. She claims to be Lindsey's best fan and can be seen walking the streets before Lindsey's live performances, dauntlessly inviting passersby, in a pretended geeky whine, to come to the show. As one watches the Phelba videos, the layers of refracted

and deflected identity are dizzying: an artist pretending to be a fan of herself, a self whose stock and trade are pretending to be—whatever: an elf, a nymph, a wild-west gunslinger, a ballet dancer, a hip-hopper, a dub-stepper.

And She Also Plays the Violin

Although Stirling's remarkable internet success has leveraged the unusual intersection of Mormon technological access, Mormon social networking, and American mashup culture, the fact remains that Stirling's fan base has expanded around the world to such an extent that she is no longer bound to virtual venues. She has completed multiple international tours with bookings in major cities throughout the world. And although her careful management of her audience relations and her explicit efforts to please her fans have made her cover songs and cosplay medleys a key to her fame, her most-watched video is that of her original song "Crystallize," which has been viewed over 133,000,000 on YouTube since its 2012 release. Whatever path Stirling's music has taken to people's screens and ears, then, and however interesting the technological and social topology of that path may be, she still makes music that people listen to, and any musicological examination of her work must eventually arrive at the music itself.

This poses some analytical challenges. For example, in the twenty-first century a wide gulf exists between live and studio performance. The technological means to cosmetically enhance or correct sub-par musical performances are now so widely available that mistakes that decades ago would never have been forgiven by the microphone can now be corrected with an app on a smart phone. Mistakes, as they say, can be "fixed in post." In fact, some problems, like being flat or sharp, can be fixed digitally on the fly. This makes it possible for Stirling, who readily admits that she does not count among the world's violin virtuosos, to nonetheless make a career as a violinist. A distinction must be made, then, between live performance and studio production.

Stirling is certainly not the first musician to struggle with the disparity between digitally-produced music and real-time

performance. But because her unusual technological savvy and social media mastery outshine her violin virtuosity, her playing draws both larger audiences and greater scrutiny than a musician of her caliber would usually garner and makes the problem of live performance more acute. Observers often comment on the less-than-professional tone she attains and note the problems she frequently encounters with pitch. A YouTube video of her live performance at San Francisco's Outside Lands Music Festival in August 2015 reveals chronic technical problems that are often compounded conspicuously when combined with dance moves. This was precisely the problem Piers Morgan complained about when he voted Stirling out of *America's Got Talent*: she couldn't play accurately while dancing. Even though Stirling highlights that criticism repeatedly as one of her principal triumphs as a YouTube sensation, her subsequent live performances never really proved Morgan *wrong*. Rather, her studio records, videos, and social media skills proved him *irrelevant*.[24]

Compositionally, Stirling's approach is highly formulaic. Certain harmonic and melodic ideas appear over and over again in her original pieces and share with her cover songs many stylistic and textural traits. Much of her music lingers in minor modes, with motoric arpeggios articulating the underlying chords or simple sustained consonant notes. Except for when she's playing someone else's melody (as in a video game or movie score), the music is not nearly as melodically driven as one might expect a violin feature to be. A trained musician who listens to a number of her original tracks might nonetheless be at a loss if asked to hum one. He would more likely recall the general effect so many of Stirling's tracks share: a sense of unspecific, burbling, misty, cinematic mystery. It's a sort of stock musical mood that echoes the recurring visual themes of semi-translucence in the videos: veils, mists, fog, shadows. It seems to conjure the kind of shared hazy musical climate that one imagines elves and orcs and fairies inhabiting. "Formulaic" cannot really be taken as a criticism in the context of what this music is supposed to do: formulas are consistent, and consistency carries value and commercial viability with its target audience. The minor mode and harmonic shifts by

thirds and steps have by now become standard musical markers, particularly in film and media music, of an Otherworld. Stirling ornaments these stock chordal vamps with fairly standard bowing figurations that hover in place without much trajectory. The music doesn't tell a story so much as convey the notion or feeling of far-flung narrative. It's a "Once upon a time. . ." but with a period instead of ellipses.

Her most-viewed song, "Crystallize," offers a characteristic example. The video was filmed in and around a fantastical structure of snow caves and blue-tinged icicle towers, sometimes lit from within. Stirling poses and prances in winter wear resembling a pixie or Peter Pan: pointy hood, tights, and boots. The music has a somewhat aggressive electronic feel. When it was uploaded in 2012, the tagline "hip-hop violinist" had been replaced by "dub-step violinist," a designation that in this case aligns much more plausibly with the music's groove. It features the prominent, spare, moderate-tempo drums and the characteristic dubstep "wub-wub" bass, overlaid with Stirling's violin melody. The minor harmonies and floating chordal loops resemble those of so many of her other tracks, as does the violin part, which works through the notes of each chord in rising and falling arpeggios and uncomplicated motivic sequences that seem to meander without arrival. This perception of "Crystallize"—that, though visually and musically pleasant enough, the song seems to spin on the ice without getting any traction—was shared by Jon Caramanica and Zachary Woolfe, who expressed in their tag-team *New York Times* review both wonder and perplexity:

> Caramanica: But there's also an otherworldly quality to it. It's the stuff of sci-fi and fantasy . . . but also of utopianism. To me, that's the most strikingly right thing she does—to tap into an idea about joy that includes the dance floor, the place in pop that still most believes in collective ecstasy. That said, she deploys the sort of moves that would leave our dance critic colleagues uneasy and unimpressed. (Me, too, for what it's worth.) And for all of this music's breathlessness, I find it cold, vague and almost mistlike in its inconsequentiality. And I like New Age music.

> Woolfe: Cold is the word. I keep wishing there was more sweat in her music. There is something so weirdly still about it, like the music that Cirque du Soleil uses to accompany all those slow-moving high-wire contortionists—a lot of busy white noise around an empty core. And just like those Cirque scores, it indicates intensity—"wow, look at that trapeze!"—rather than being intense.[25]

This seems to be the key to the music: it indicates intensity without being intense because it is meant to evoke genre without actually telling a story. And not a musical genre, a media genre. It's supposed to *sound* how liking video games or fantasy characters *feel*s.

In the banter between songs during a live performance at the 2015 Outside Lands Music Festival, Stirling described an aspect of her method that contributes directly to the drifting, drafty character of her music. She explained that often she comes up with the basic concept for one of her videos *before* she has written any music for it. Once the visual concept is in place, one or more of her standard musical formulas presumably serves to populate the visual concept with compatible sound. The music lacks teleology in part because it doesn't attempt to melodically follow a plot—it seeks to harmonically and texturally evoke an atmosphere. That atmosphere would seem at first to be mysterious: it has all the musical markers of intrigue and the unknown. Accordingly, Stirling can be seen in several videos repeatedly craning her neck, peering expectantly but with trepidation, as if seeking the source of a threatening sound or wondering what awaits around a corner. But the atmosphere is also safe; it is the air breathed in that fantasy world where, no matter what danger awaits, no one is a weirdo because everyone is a weirdo: pixies, pirates, nerds, geeks, and even Mormons.

Notes

1. Arianna Rees, "Why Lindsey Stirling's Billboard Dress Doesn't Matter," *Deseret News*, May 21, 2015, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865629148/Arianna-Rees-Why-Lindsey-Stirlings-Billboard-dress-doesnt-matter.html.

2. See, for example, Samantha Shelley, "Sit Down, Modesty Police—Lindsey Stirling Looked Great at the BBMAs," *Whatsoever is Good* (blog), May 19, 2015, http://www.whatsoeverisgood.com/sit-down-modesty-police-lindsey-stirling-looked-great-at-the-bbmas.

3. Chelsea Potter, comp., "Lindsey Stirling Responds to Modesty Criticism on Instagram," *Deseret News*, May 21, 2015, http://www.deseretnews.com/article/865629183/Lindsey-Stirling-responds-to-modesty-criticism-on-Instagram.html.

4. "Students react to Lindsey Stirling's dress—what the clothes say," YouTube video, 0:33, posted by "what the clothes say," May 21, 2015, https://youtu.be/17wxPmzk7MU. See also Megan Gee, "What the Dress Said: Lindsey Stirling," *What the Clothes Say* (blog), May 22, 2015, https://whattheclothessay.wordpress.com/2015/05/22/what-the-dress-said-lindsey-stirling.

5. A few months later, Stirling gently poked fun at the controversy, posting a selfie to her Instagram account in a boxy, black, puritanical-looking dress with multi-layered coverage from neck to wrist to ankle and the caption, "Ready for the #teenchoiceawards. Playing it safe this time around #thedress." Lindsey Stirling (@lindseystirling), Instagram post, August 16, 2015, https://instagram.com/p/6dHsjoLk6t.

6. J. B. Haws, *The Mormon Image in the American Mind: Fifty Years of Public Perception* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 195.

7. "About," Lindsey Stirling, last accessed November 2, 2015, http://www.lindseystirling.com/about.

8. Henry Jenkins, "Why Do We Need to 'Understand' Fans?: A Conversation with Mark Duffett (Part One)," *Confessions of an Aca-Fan: The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins* (blog), March 3, 2014, http://henryjenkins.org/2014/03/why-do-we-need-to-understand-fans-a-conversation-with-mark-duffett-part-one.html.

9. Jacob F. Frandsen, "Violin with a High Kick," *BYU Magazine* (Summer 2012), http://magazine-dev.byu.edu/violin-with-a-high-kick.

10. Henry Jenkins, Sam Ford, and Joshua Green, *Spreadable Media: Creating Value and Meaning in a Networked Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2013), 10.

11. Ibid., 11.

12. The "Mormon Effect" in reality television shows has been covered widely in the popular press. See, for example, Sally Atkinson, "Reality TV: America's Next Top Mormon," *Newsweek*, May 10, 2008, http://www.

newsweek.com/reality-tv-americas-next-top-mormon-90117, or Atkinson, "American Idols: Mormons and Reality TV," *Newsweek*, May 5, 2008, http://www.newsweek.com/2008/05/05/america-s-next-top-mormon.html. For a more thorough examination, see Karen D. Austin, "Reality Corrupts; Reality Television Corrupts Absolutely," in *Peculiar Portrayals: Mormons on the Stage, Page, and Screen*, edited by Mark T. Decker and Michael Austin (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2010), 183–96.

13. As compiled in "Sampling of Latter-day Saint/Utah Demographics and Social Statistics from National Sources," http://www.adherents.com/largecom/lds_dem.html.

14. Benjamin Burroughs, "'And I'm a (Social Media) Mormon': Digital Ritual, Techno-faith, and Religious Transmedia," *Qwerty: Open and Interdisciplinary Journal of Technology, Culture and Education* 8, no. 2 (2013): 71–81.

15. The first "Face to Face" event featured *American Idol* runner-up David Archuleta. The third would be Elder David A. Bednar and his wife, Susan.

16. This way of talking about genre also carries racial undertones; Mormon musical culture has a long history of appropriating and "domesticating" music—including jazz, then rock—previously considered by more conservative Mormons to be both socially and racially problematic. The invocation of "hip-hop" connotes race whether Stirling intends to or not.

17. See Jeremy Grimshaw and Ali Colleen Neff, "The Tribal Sounds of Sal Tlay Ka Siti: Alex Boyé's 'Africanized' Covers and Mormon Racial Dynamics," paper presented at the Society for Ethnomusicology 59th Annual Meeting, Pittsburgh, Pa., November 2014.

18. Loolwa Khazzoom, "Kanye West Violinist Miri Ben-Ari Debuts," *Rolling Stone*, September 23, 2005, http://www.rollingstone.com/music/news/kanye-west-violinist-miri-ben-ari-debuts-20050923.

19. Brooke Self, "Lindsey Stirling—Hip Hop Violinist," Her Campus, April 9, 2011, http://www.hercampus.com/school/byu/lindsey-stirling-hip-hop-violinist.

20. "Lindsey Stirling America's Got Talent," YouTube video, from *America's Got Talent* 2010 quarterfinals, posted by Lukas Eriksson, April 27, 2012, https://youtu.be/M2xL7D5lPAk.

21. Whether in imitation or simply as a result of arriving at the same idea at the same time, in late 2011 another YouTube violinist, Taylor Davis, began posting her video game soundtrack arrangements and fantasy-inspired videos. See https://www.youtube.com/user/ViolinTay.

22. "YouTube Music Stars," *Larry King Now*, December 7, 2012, http://www.ora.tv/larrykingnow/2012/12/7/youtube-musicians-0_5fhqfbvl.

23. "Lindsey Stirling Sister Debut—Studio C," YouTube video, posted by Studio C, November 7, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9omhrI0Pnq8.

24. Nonetheless, even though Stirling left *America's Got Talent*, she can't leave it alone. In live performances of her track "Moon Trance," the YouTube video of which is a "Thriller"-inspired zombie dance in a cemetery, the dancers come onto the stage behind oversized cartoonish headstones—one of which purports to mark Piers Morgan's grave.

25. Jon Caramanica and Zachary Woolfe, "Defining an Online Phenomenon: Virtuoso or a Wedding Band Star?" *New York Times*, May 2, 2014, http://nyti.ms/1iU09jc.