

From Music to Noise: The Decline of Street Music

Bruce Johnson

University of Technology, Sydney; University of Turku; University of Glasgow
Email: brujoh@utu.fi

The history of live street music is the history of an endangered species, either suppressed or trivialized as little more than 'local colour'. Five hundred years ago the streets of Elizabethan London were rich with the sounds of street vendors, ballad-makers and musicians, and in general the worst that might be said of the music was that the same songs were too often repeated – what we would now call 'on high rotation'. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, the poet Wordsworth and advocate of the 'common man' was describing street music as 'monstrous', and throughout that century vigorous measures were being applied to suppress such sounds, which were now categorized as noise. By the twenty-first century, live street music has been virtually silenced but for the occasional licensed busker or sanctioned parade. Paradoxically, this process of decline is intersected by a technologically sustained 'aural renaissance' that can be dated from the late nineteenth century. This article explores the reasons for the gradual extinction of live street music and the transformation of the urban soundscape. It argues connections with issues of class, the rise of literacy, the sacralization of private property and the formation of the politics of modernity.

In 2013, internationally eminent violinist Jon Rose was ordered by security personnel to stop playing on the forecourt of the Sydney Opera House.¹ The incident invites the obvious question: why might somebody not play outside a concert hall when the same person would be applauded when playing inside? When, in 2007, acclaimed violinist Joshua Bell, who filled concert halls around the world at over \$100 per seat, played the same repertoire outside the Metro station on a Washington street, few listened.² He made \$32. This article begins with the question: why did street music fall into such a deep decline over the last several centuries? Today, street music is rarely heard, except for annual sanctioned events like Anzac Day, Australia's official remembrance day for the First World War. At other times it is associated with poverty or indigence, as in its scattered reappearance during the Great Depression, or, today, the occasional busker.

This makes for a puzzling comparison with the acoustic richness of Elizabethan street sound and music. These sounds included the cries of peripatetic street vendors, which were a form of music, to the extent that they could be incorporated

¹ 'Jon Rose Violin Solo at Sydney Opera House2', YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tf9JukT1iMY (accessed 8 December 2014).

² 'Joshua Bell playing violin in DC Metro Station. Please Stop and Hear the Music!!!', YouTube video, www.youtube.com/watch?v=UM21gPmkDpI (accessed 8 January 2015).

into formal art music compositions and popular songs.³ Only a few survive if at all in contemporary memory, such as the songs 'Cockles and Mussels' and 'I've Got a Lovely Bunch of Coconuts'. But a great number of songs have been documented from the pre-or early-modern era, as in examples recorded by poet John Lydgate (c. 1370–c. 1451) in his 'London Lackpenny'. Examples also include the cries of watchmen, also referred to as 'Waits', who used musical instruments as well as their voices to signal their activity. In many cases these groups evolved into city bands, employed by the local authorities to play in the streets. In England they are reported from as early as the thirteenth century, but they began to die out from the late eighteenth century, partly because of municipal legislation. The Metropolitan Police Act of 1864, still in force, explicitly legislated against street musicians in general. Street musicians had been subject to various kinds of licensing controls going back at least as far as Henry VIII. There was special suspicion of ballad hawkers, but unlike the aesthetics that frame contemporary attitudes to busking, the reasons were mainly because of potential political content, and the evidence is that the anti-street-music statutes were selectively enforced according to political criteria. But more generally, visitors and locals recorded their great delight in these street cries and musics, any public complaints not being so much at the street music as such, as at what we would call high rotation – repetitiveness: 'The too speedy return of one manner of tune, doth too much annoy'.⁴

Clearly something happened between the sixteenth and twentieth centuries to deepen and shift the grounds of opposition to street music. John Picker's benchmark study of Victorian soundscapes shows that by the mid-nineteenth century, this opposition had consolidated itself, literally with a vengeance, with street musicians characterized as alien enemies to native intellectual culture. Even that spokesman for the common man, Charles Dickens, subscribed to petitions against this democratic music experience.⁵ So what happened somewhere around the eighteenth century, to reduce a rich culture of street music to a practice somewhere between the trivial and the undesirable? I believe that this process can be understood largely in terms of the history of modernity itself, and it illustrates a very simple idea: by studying the changing politics of sound in general, of which the disappearance of street music is one highly audible example, we understand more fully the history of emerging modernity. As an obvious starting point: the watchman's cries were replaced by clocks – also a product of the industrialized regulation of time; the town crier and ballad makers and sellers were replaced by the press. That is, the decline of street music is a matter of the material and intellectual culture of modernity. I want to suggest that street music embodies a constellation of hitherto more or less value-neutral practices and forms of consciousness that became profoundly politicized with the emergence of modernity. And it seems to be in the eighteenth century that the tipping point was reached, as in a famous Hogarth engraving, from 1741 (Fig. 1).

Represented here is the array of many of the conceptual binaries I want to discuss that encapsulate the historical tensions out of which modernity emerged: indoor versus outdoor music; mobile versus stationed cultural practices; propertied bourgeoisie versus the indigent underclasses; regulated versus unregulated noise.

³ The following account of Elizabethan street music is based on familiar and well-established texts, as exemplified by Percy A. Scholes, *The Oxford Companion to Music*. 7th reprint ed. John Owen Ward (London: Oxford University Press, 1980): 986–90.

⁴ Quoted in H.E. Wooldridge, *Old English Popular Music* (New York: Jack Brussel, 1961).

⁵ John Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003): 60–62.



Fig. 1 Hogarth's 'Enraged musician', 1741

Hogarth takes the trouble to show us that the violinist is reading from sheet music on a stand, while those outside are clearly sounding out 'by ear'. Thus, there is also here the tension between literacy and illiteracy. I shall take that apparently unconnected phenomenon as my entry point: that is, the ascendancy of print as the primary authoritative information circuit. The earliest books printed in English were translations by William Caxton from 1472, but it has been estimated that it was not until the mid-eighteenth century that print became fully dominant as the standard medium for the everyday circulation of information.⁶ This is not just the rather obvious growth of publishing and literacy. There had long been books and a literate section of society – mainly the clergy – but they had written by hand, producing books that were not for general public circulation, so most of the everyday business of life was conducted orally, based literally on one's 'word' – verbal agreements, customs transmitted orally, and even everyday street commerce. In fact, reading was often conducted aloud from manuscript. Sir Philip Sidney's massive prose work, *The Arcadia*, was originally written for private circulation among the Countess of Pembroke's circle and not published in the

⁶ Alvin Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989): 49. Originally published as *Printing Technology, Letters, and Samuel Johnson* (1987), same publisher.

author's lifetime.⁷ The same tensions between orality and literacy, what is heard and what is seen, pervade and define that wonderfully instructive drama of the transition to modernity, *Hamlet*. When the young Prince enters a room reading a book, for example, this would have added to the growing suspicion that there was something rather odd about him, since silent, perambulatory reading was still an unfamiliar practice.⁸ It is not until everyday transactions were required to be in printed rather than spoken form that we judge print to have become the standard information medium: posters, theatre bills, newspapers, magazines, marriage certificates (as opposed to parish records), receipts, indentures, contracts, tickets and, later, transport timetables, likewise the rise of the novel, and of prose in general, author's copyright, the writing of literary histories.⁹ That is, the transition from a predominantly oral to a predominantly print culture took over two centuries.

That transition reflected another, which will bring us closer to the history of street music. Even though print had become the dominant information circuit by the mid-1700s, this still did not mean everyone was taught to read; that waited for the Education Act of 1870 which prescribed universal literacy. This Act also laid the foundations of mass print media – tabloid newspapers and new literary genres, like popular novels such as those by R.L. Stevenson, 'railway' literature. Until then, literacy defined an emerging social disjunction that characterizes modernity. The distinction between those who could read and those who could not became one of the most significant markers of a new way of structuring society: the transition from 'status' to the more dynamic model of class. In Marlowe's *Dr Faustus*, Envy – the son of a chimney sweep and an oyster wife – wishes all books were burned. This 'envy' was thus aligned with class.¹⁰ The spread of literacy in the eighteenth century was largely confined to the emerging urban bourgeoisie, eager to distinguish itself from the growing urban under-classes, at a time before the segregation of classes by suburb.

It is easy to forget just how many privileges are required to participate in the print culture of the early modern period. Obviously it requires education, but also that the child must be able to be spared from the household. It presupposes leisure, both to learn to read, and then for reading itself, particularly given the length of those early novels as exemplified in Richardson's 'handbook' to middle class behaviour for young women, *Clarissa*. A significant level of affluence was needed to provide access to books in the absence of public libraries, to make domestic space to store books, and even to buy good quality candles for winter evenings' reading. As Ian Watt's pioneering study demonstrated in the case of the novel the rise of a textual information economy thus parallels the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, and the two found a powerful alliance: print as an instrument of authority for the emerging new classes.¹¹ The difference between a reading culture and an oral culture became a class issue (among many other things). The emerging

⁷ Maurice Evans, Introduction to Sir Philip Sidney's *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1977): 10.

⁸ On sound and silence in *Hamlet*, see further Bruce Johnson, 'Hamlet: Voice, Music, Sound', *Popular Music* 24/2 (2005): 257–67.

⁹ Kernan, *Samuel Johnson and the Impact of Print*, 48, 49.

¹⁰ See further Nigel Wheale, *Writing and Society: Literacy, print and politics in Britain 1590–1660* (London: Routledge, 1999): 1–2.

¹¹ Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson and Fielding* (Harmondsworth: Penguin/Chatto & Windus, 1970, first pub. 1957): 49–50.

mercantile bourgeoisie enjoyed the benefits of literacy, and the printed word became the means by which they exercised power.

As the practice of silent reading and learning became more widespread, first among the emerging and dominant bourgeoisie, so did the idea that the authority of information lay in the fact of its being in written, rather than oral form. In Western societies print carries authority, and orality became (and still remains) associated with unauthorized, unreliable, and even subversive sites of knowledge, likely to disturb those who are concerned with the higher powers of the mind. In his *Dictionary*, which embodied the national discourse, Samuel Johnson refused to admit words that were 'casual and mutable', 'fugitive cant', into his dictionary.¹² To qualify for admission, a word had to be in print – that is, in the realm of literacy. Similarly, it was in the eighteenth century that Shakespeare's work was transformed from theatre to literature, a shift from a sound to print. Indeed, it was even declared that his works were unsuitable for the stage.¹³ This distrust of sound as a site of information became inscribed in the English language itself. 'Don't believe everything you hear', 'Seeing is believing'. It is noteworthy how many of the following terms arose, or forfeited their cultural capital, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: hearsay, gossip, tittle-tattle, sounding off, chatter, whingeing or moaning, Chinese whispers, rumour, lip service, scolding, nagging, blab, babble, prate, prattle.

This process can be encapsulated in two discussions of good breeding, several centuries apart. Erasmus' essay 'On the Body' advised against immoderate public laughter, but described it primarily as a visible phenomenon, a distortion of the face.¹⁴ This recalls the sixteenth-century advice against gentlemen playing the trumpet, because it distorts the features beyond recognition.¹⁵ In neither case is it the sound that is the problem. This is in the sixteenth century. Two centuries later, Lord Chesterfield in his 1774 *Letters to His Son* advised against 'Frequent and loud laughter ... it is the manner in which the mob express their silly joy at silly things. In my mind there is nothing so illiberal, and so ill-bred, as audible laughter'.¹⁶ He opposes the noisiness of laughter to refinement, true wit, reflection, reason. By the time we come to Chesterfield, the complaint against public laughter is based on the fact that it is a noise, which again tends to confirm the emergence of spontaneous aural modalities as the site of ill-breeding and class antagonism. The public signs of good breeding are moving away from how we regulate our appearance to how we regulate the sounds we make (which parallels the emergence of accents designated as upper and lower class, as well as region; we may also see the decline of sumptuary laws regulating public dress as a corollary).

Here, then, is the historical model: the rise of print is connected with the ascendancy of the capitalist bourgeoisie. They demonstrate their superiority through literacy, and they extend their national and international empires through

¹² Samuel Johnson, *A Dictionary of the English Language* (London: Plummer and Brewis, 1825), 10.

¹³ See further Bruce Johnson, 'Divided Loyalties: Literary Responses to the Rise of Oral Authority in the Modern Era', *Textus* XIX (Spring 2006): 285–304.

¹⁴ This was drawn to my attention by Anca Parvulescu, 'The Sound of Laughter', *ASCA Conference Sonic Interventions: Pushing the Boundaries of Cultural Analysis* (2005), Reader for Panel 2: *The Sonic in the 'Silent' Arts and Bring in the Noise*, Coordinator, Sylvia Mieszkowski, 118.

¹⁵ John Buxton, *Elizabethan Taste* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1964): 8.

¹⁶ Parvulescu, 'The Sound of Laughter', 118.

the printed word: bureaucratic, legal and commercial documents, contracts, treaties, and from the Napoleonic wars even paper money. The standardization of print (maps, documents, diagrams, timetables, charters and contracts) are all essential embodiments of a capitalist hegemony. And culturally the same imperial project is served through books newspapers, scored music, and even the rise of literary study itself as traced in Baldick's landmark study.¹⁷ Confronting this network is an alternative information economy which is primarily sonic, and which represents a challenge to the print-based hegemony. As print became the most important and authoritative form of knowledge, sonic information in general became the subject of trivialization or suspicion, and therefore subject to increasing regulation.

We can illustrate the opposition through aspects of emergent modernity that will draw us into a sense of its relevance to the decline of street music. There is no need to rehearse in detail the long-established and prolific arguments that, historically, all music-making takes place within a context of class and economic relations, as already widely documented.¹⁸ And as Bourdieu famously noted, 'art and cultural consumption are predisposed, consciously and deliberately or not, to fulfil a function of legitimating social differences'.¹⁹ This conjunction is particularly evident at the point at which the hegemony imposes explicit coercion, that is, the law, a dramatic and apposite site at which these two information economies converged.

From the 1690s, a series of 'capital acts' multiplied the number of crimes liable to the death penalty,²⁰ including various forms of forgery; that is, violation of the printed record. Crimes against private property predominated. The Waltham Black Act of 1723 for example created over 200 capital offences, including anti-poaching laws such as against being armed and disguised in the vicinity of game.²¹ These legal developments reflect the larger transition I have been describing. Over the eighteenth century, unwritten customary rights came into increasing conflict with a new phase of capitalism: the privileging of private over

¹⁷ Chris Baldick, *The Social Mission of English Criticism 1848–1932* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1983).

¹⁸ See, for example, William Weber, *Music and the Middle Class: The Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna between 1830 and 1848* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1975); Richard Middleton, 'Popular Music of the Lower Classes', in *The Romantic Age 1800–1914*, ed. Nicholas Temperley, The Althone History of Music in Britain (London: Athlone Press, 1981): 63–91; Russell Sanjek, *American Popular Music and its Business*, especially vol. 2: *From 1790 to 1909* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989); Richard Leppert, *The Sight of Sound: Music, Representation, and the History of the Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840–1914: a Social History*, second edition (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997); Derek B. Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour*, second edition (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); Philip Tagg and Bob Clarida, *Ten Little Title Tunes: Towards a Musicology of the Mass Media* (New York: The Mass Media Music Scholar's Press, 2003).

¹⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Routledge, 1984).

²⁰ Peter Linebaugh, *The London Hanged: Crime and Civil Society in the Eighteenth Century* (London: Verso, 2006): 54.

²¹ Alan Brooke and David Brandon, *Tyburn: London's Fatal Tree* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 2004): 72.

common property. It was also a continuing transition from unwritten, verbal understandings to the rule of written law. The legal records of eighteenth century England suggest a massive rise in crime. But this is not because the country suddenly saw a sudden shift to criminal intentions. It is because this was a significant transition in a shift from traditional customs to new laws in regulating human conduct. Hitherto, labourers could help themselves to left-over timber in shipyards, tailors to left-over cloth in tailors, smiths of all metals to left-over shavings and dust. In the new capitalist economic environment, with its fetishization of private property, these traditional unwritten entitlements were abolished by new laws initiated by the emerging mercantile and industrial manufacturing classes for the protection of their property.

A lumper was a labourer who unloaded cargo on the Thames docks. It was heavy and backbreaking work, shifting containers like barrels that might contain tobacco, sugar, spirits and other imported consumables. There was spillage from barrels damaged on the voyage or during their often long wait to be unloaded. The lumper had a traditional entitlement to sweep up and keep spillage, and doubtless these were increased by some deliberate rough handling. On such low wages, these sweepings, and what they could be bartered or sold for, were essential to livelihood. As new labour relations and legislation abolished such customary privileges, a man could be hanged or transported for this offence against what was now strictly private property. At the very least, he would lose his job. Thus, if this 'ordinary' labourer continued his 'ordinary' labour customs, he was a criminal. If he desisted he would shortly be destitute, and crime his only recourse. Under earlier labour conditions a cottage weaver kept some of the scraps for barter or sale, a customary entitlement for the self-employed. In the new framework of factory labour relations, this became theft from the boss. If we can imagine discovering that the pencils or writing paper that we took home from the office stationery cupboard suddenly made us liable to the death penalty, we may get some sense of the shock experienced by largely illiterate labourers under these rapidly changing conditions.²² In 1734 a Dutchman resident in London made a detailed study of the budget for a labouring man in London. He concluded that under current conditions it was impossible for such an individual to earn more than half what was necessary to support a wife and two children.²³ The only alternative was a range of practices now designated criminal.

Largely as a consequence, the number of legal executions increased, and here we find further evidence of the changing valorizations of oral and written cultures. Public executions were held in London up to about eight times each year. They involved a public procession of the condemned from Newgate Prison to Tyburn –what is now Marble Arch. These events were the biggest public spectacles of their day, the reality shows of the era. One of the rituals involved the final speech of the condemned, and it is surprising how often these became occasions for dark comedy and subversion, defiant declarations of the criminal career and a proud acceptance of execution. Following the execution, written 'last speeches' and pseudo-memoirs were on sale often with only the most erratic reference to the actual sentiments promulgated by the condemned on the scaffold. These tended to be confessional, penitential, subservient to and fully accepting of the justice of their fate. The point here is that while the unregulated public performance, the oral testimony, was notoriously subversive of the justice system, the written

²² See further Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*.

²³ Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 190.

testimony, subject to the constraints of publication licensing, accepted its authority. The Tyburn broadsides 'almost always paid lip-service to conventional morality; their values were sentimental, not transgressive'.²⁴

As exemplified at executions, in both the delivery and the public applause for his final defiance, public noise was increasingly regarded as potentially seditious; unmonitored vocalization itself came to be heard as contrary to good order and citizenship. And from the late eighteenth century, this extended into the prison system. Prior to this, prisons were places of great volubility. An account of the English prison system published by reformer John Howard in 1777, included proposals for improving the institution: 'Solitude and silence are favourable to reflection, and may possibly lead to repentance'.²⁵ Silence has come to be the signifier and the driver of civil obedience, deference to the rule of law. Prison reformer Elizabeth Fry visited Newgate Prison in 1813, and was shocked by 'the filth, the closeness of the rooms, the ferocious manners and expressions of the women towards each other And *her ears were offended* by the most terrible imprecations'.²⁶ She later spoke of 'the dreadful proceedings that went forward on the female side of the prison; the begging, *swearing, fighting, gaming, singing, dancing, dressing up in men's clothes* – the scenes too bad to be described'.²⁷

In April 1817 Fry formed The Association for the Improvement of Female Prisoners in Newgate, which passed rules of conduct calling for the women to be engaged in approved employment, and that there should be no '*begging, swearing, gaming, card-playing, quarrelling or immoral conversation*' (all italics in the above are mine) and that at 9 a.m. and 6 p.m. they should be gathered together to listen to readings from the Bible.²⁸ These led to changes, described by a male visitor:

On my approach no loud or dissonant sounds or angry voices indicated that I was about to enter a place, which ... had long had for one of its titles that of 'Hell above ground'. The courtyard into which I was admitted, instead of being peopled with beings scarcely human, blaspheming, fighting, tearing each others' hair, or gaming with a filthy pack of cards for the filthy clothes they wore, ... presented a scene where stillness and propriety reigned ... a lady from the Society of Friends ... was reading aloud to about sixteen women prisoners who were engaged in needlework. ... They all rose on my entrance, curtsied respectfully and then at a signal resumed their seats and employments.²⁹

The Prison Act of 1865 enforced the 'separate system' throughout Britain, whereby prisoners shall be

prevented from holding any communications with each other, either by every prisoner being kept in a separate cell by day and by night except when he is at chapel or taking exercise, or by every prisoner being confined by night in his cell and

²⁴ V.A.C. Gartrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People 1770–1868* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994): 109–224, here 156; Linebaugh, *The London Hanged*, 88–91; Brooke and Brandon, *Tyburn*, 178–95.

²⁵ Anthony Babington, *The English Bastille: A History of Newgate Gaol and Prison Conditions in Britain 1188–1902* (London: Macdonald, 1971): 109.

²⁶ Babington, *The English Bastille*, 153.

²⁷ Babington, *The English Bastille*, 155.

²⁸ Babington, *The English Bastille*, 156.

²⁹ Babington, *The English Bastille*, 157.

being subject to such superintendence during the day as will prevent his communicating with any other prisoner.³⁰

The regulation of sound thus became the sign of obedience to the state.³¹ In all this we have two historical records represented: the record produced by the new underclasses created and exploited by industrial capitalism, and the record created by the propertied classes who are privileged by capitalism. The first is mainly oral, the second is mainly written. This is not to make the absurd claim that the distinction is absolute and impermeable, but that the latter was more accessible to the dominant group and a primary site of its power. We are seeing here a new politicization of sound, the increasing authority of print, the decreasing trustworthiness of oral information.

This dynamic was amplified by a further manifestation of emerging modernity, which again encompassed street music in its force field: that is, the rapid expansion of the unpropertied urban underclasses. Two forces in particular drove this demographic: the displacements of populations from their rural homes, and the growing need for cheap labour in growing industrial centres. The former are represented by the enclosures of common land in England and the highland clearances in Scotland. This expropriation of common land by an emerging capitalist class in the interests of private profit reverberated in cities with the growing industrialization of production, and the massive influx of displaced rural labourers and artisans. Together, these developments generated a large population of indigent wanderers and artisans with no stake in the system. This in turn set up a powerful political tension between the mobile and the stationary: that is, those with no apparent abode or fixed workplace, and those who owned property and worked from fixed bases. This mobility was accompanied by a suspicion of a general lack of fixity among underclasses: migrant labour, the homeless, the displaced, and information circuits that do not have written stability. Such as, to point forward, the distinction between peripatetic musicians and those with fixed appointments in dedicated recreational sites. Likewise, music, oral forms, not written down, are regarded as untrustworthy, rooted in the mobility of the body, not preserved in the permanent shrine of written ideas. The idea of unpropertied or uncontracted wanderers became so threatening as to have given us the demonized abbreviation of the word mobile: the mob. At the same time, the word 'station' and its related forms, suggested order. This in itself arises from the developments I have been outlining. We have two words, stationery, referring to paper, and stationary, meaning fixed, still. They are connected in a way that discloses a significant force in our cultural history. Earlier we spoke of itinerant vendors. With the increasing industrialization of commerce, and the associated heavy equipment, places of business and manufacture became fixed, and one of the first of these was printing and publishing for the literate. It is necessary to conduct this new activity from a fixed location. Stationery can only be processed from a location that is stationary.

A fixed station became a modern sign of productive labour, a form of fixed property that indicated productive citizenship with a stake in the society, a person of station or, we can say, with status. Those who roamed the streets willy-nilly,

³⁰ Babington, *The English Bastille*, 222.

³¹ The foregoing account of the silent system is adapted from Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2008): 38–9.

on the other hand, were a threat to good order, as was traumatically demonstrated during the biggest municipal uprising in London's history, the Gordon Riots of June 1780. Here was proof of the dangers of the rowdy mob, who, significantly, burnt Newgate to the ground. This was further confirmation of the need to regulate public behaviour by any means possible and, in particular, voluble behaviour, so much less trustworthy than the printed record. The Riot Act of 1715 had recognized the dangers of public uproar, in limiting the right to gather and create what it called a public 'tumult'. All the forces of modernity converged in the increasingly severe regulation of public noise throughout the eighteenth century. Unregulated sound and music became characteristic of the vulgar lower orders. They make noise. In doing so they manifest themselves as a threat to a print-based, propertied hegemonic bourgeoisie. Over the last 500 years, silence or regulated sound increasingly came to signify obedience and submission to authority: churches, theatres, factories, school rooms, offices: all places of study, productivity and improvement had sound, speech, music, tightly regulated. All places where there was no such regulation were regarded as threats to social order. Low culture, social disorder, trivial and immoral recreations, are always associated with noisiness: pop venues, political demonstrations, sports arenas. And street music.

The drive to sonic regulation is connected with the appearance of the purpose-built concert hall, reflecting the evolution of an art music that cannot be contaminated by the everyday noises of social life both inside and outside the performance space. The process parallels the rise to authority of modern tablature in contrast to music transmitted aurally. The first dedicated concert halls were built in the eighteenth century, in such centres as Oxford, London, Leipzig, Hanover; significantly, all with substantial and increasingly powerful middle class populations. Unregulated noise was becoming increasingly vulgar. Hearing voices adjacent to where a number of Irish had been imprisoned awaiting trial for London's Radcliffe Highway murders of 1811, the magistrates enquiring into the cause were told 'Oh! It is nothing but those horrid Irish, who can never be quiet'.³² Those who made noise were, in some sense or another, 'The Other'. Unregulated street music is a threat to the constellation of forces that sustain bourgeois capitalism.

One of the great catalysts in the growing fear of the unregulated noise of the mob, was of course the French Revolution. Originally inspired by its supposed emancipation of the common man, poet William Wordsworth came to despise the urban mass and its noise. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, he provides us with the blueprint aesthetics for the future of urban noise and street music. As in his perennial anthology piece Wordsworth finds London beautiful when standing back from it in the silence of the morning on Westminster Bridge.

Ne'er saw I, never felt, a calm so deep!
The river glideth at his own sweet will:
Dear God! the very houses seem asleep;
And all that mighty heart is lying still!³³

Wordsworth has removed the one thing that gives a human space a life of its own: people. And he has removed something else that expresses that unruly life: noise.

³² Oliver Cyriax, *The Penguin Encyclopedia of Crime* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1996): 626.

³³ William Wordsworth, 'Composed upon Westminster Bridge, September 3, 1802', in *The Poetical Works* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959): 214. All citations from Wordsworth are from the Oxford University Press 1959 edition.

This is the city de-populated and silenced, reduced to a comfortably completed 'visual' text.

But in his famous poem in praise of Nature, *The Prelude*, in Book 7 he visits London again, to find noisy neighbours. And it becomes, instead, 'a monstrous ant hill' (line 149), 'the endless stream of men' (line 151), full of the 'Babel din'. As sound rises to challenge the aesthetics and order of an ocularcentric regime, street music becomes situated as unruly noise, as opposed to 'art'. The city is full of an oppressive 'roar' (line 168), a 'deafening din' (line 155), which includes 'a minstrel band' (line 178), an 'English Ballad-singer' (line 180), 'some female vendor's scream, ... the shrillest of all London cries' (lines 182–3), all part of a 'thickening hubbub' (line 211). There are 'singers', not imagined as musicians, but as part of the 'uproar of the rabblement' (line 273), among which he hears 'for the first time in my life, The voice of woman utter blasphemy' (lines 384–5). The city confronts Wordsworth with the rising tide of modern mass culture, the actuality of the contemporary 'common man'. And it is demonized as an acoustic culture, its music experienced as part of the noise, summarized in microcosm at Bartholomew Fair:

... what anarchy and din,
 Barbarian and infernal, ...
 buffoons ... screaming – him who grinds
 The hurdy-gurdy, at the fiddle weaves,
 Rattles the salt-box, thumps the kettledrum,
 And him who at the trumpet puffs his cheeks,
 The silver-collared Negro with his timbrel,
 ... Ventriloquists ...
 The bust that speaks ...
 ... far-fetched, perverted things, ...
 All jumbled up together, to compose
 A Parliament of Monsters³⁴

Throughout the nineteenth century, the means of circulating sound beyond the range of the human voice became increasingly available to the masses, particularly through sound recordings and later sonic technologies. In parallel with what I have called the 'aural Renaissance',³⁵ there was thus a reaction among the genteel classes that may be described as sonophobia. The masses do not invade the streets with music; they intrude upon the soundscape of the city with noise. Indeed, it is interesting to discover where the poet finds the aesthetic consolations of music. For that we must look to his countryside, where he can hear: 'A choir' of birds, 'minstrels from the distant woods' (lines 21–2), 'heartsome Choristers' (line 29) who 'chant together' with him (line 31) and 'warbled at my door' (line 41). Or he retreats to a classical pastoral of antiquity 'where the pipe was heard ... thrilling the rocks / With tutelary music' (Book 8, lines 183–4).

Wordsworth's advocacy for the common man was generally limited to the picturesque rural worker keeping his place by pursuing traditional forms and modes of labour. As far as the 'common man' of the urban masses was concerned, what we read in *The Prelude* is what we viewed in Hogarth's enraged musician half a century earlier: the horror experienced by the educated bourgeoisie at the rise of the modern urban proletariat. Hogarth was a most astute observer of the

³⁴ From lines 686–718.

³⁵ See for example Johnson, 'Divided Loyalties'.

significant everyday culture of his age: the progress of the rake, the idle apprentice, the drunks, the prostitutes, the debauched aristocracy and the street musicians. Every detail in his work is a sign of his times. If we return to his engraving, we see foreshadowed the conflicting forces of the emerging dynamics of modernity: the urban underclasses versus the economically ascendant middle classes; the importance of a culture of fixed property over the threatening unpredictability of the peripatetic masses; of a static written, over a fluid oral culture. In musical terms this translates into many forms, even the elevation of the strings over the more physical wind instruments – that, for another argument. We see, above all, the superior refinement of indoor over outdoor recreation: the shift in the understanding of street performance from entertaining music to vulgar and abhorrent noise.