

Introduction

Street Music in the Nineteenth Century: Histories and Historiographies

Paul Watt
Monash University
paul.watt@monash.edu

This article highlights the paucity of musicological scholarship on street music in the nineteenth century but examines narratives of noise, music and morality that are situated in studies of street music in related literature. The article argues that a new history of street music in the nineteenth century is overdue and charts ways in which such studies may be undertaken given the substantial primary source material to work with and the proliferation and usefulness of theoretical studies in related disciplines.

Street music is an under-developed area of research with potentially rich pickings in a variety of musicological, ethnomusicological and interdisciplinary settings. At the time of writing there is no standard book on the subject and no entry for it in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* and only brief coverage of street music in *The Oxford Companion to Music*.¹ In 2015, a recent special-issue of the *Journal of Musicological Research* entitled ‘Street Music: Ethnography, Performance, Theory’, establishes some conceptual frameworks and examples around how studies of street music might be undertaken, though it doesn’t cover the nineteenth century.²

Many historical and cultural studies deal with street music of the nineteenth century, but mostly only in passing, and nearly always framed in contexts of aesthetics and politics of noise and silence.³ Rowdy musicians, screeching town

¹ Peter Wilton, ‘Street music’, *The Oxford Companion to Music*, accessed 17 June 2015.

² ‘Street Music: Ethnography, Performance, Theory’, special issue of *Journal of Musicological Research* 35/2 (2016), edited by Paul Watt.

³ Literature in English on the nineteenth century that deals with noise, sound and street music (largely in England) – but to various degrees of depth and breadth – are Ronald Pearsall, *Victorian Popular Music* (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1973); James Winter, *London’s Teeming Streets, 1830–1914* (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Peter Bailey, *Popular Culture and Performance in the Victorian City* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); John M. Picker, ‘The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space, and Urban Noise’, *Victorian Studies* 42/3 (Spring 1999–Spring 2003): 427–53; Sean Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Brenda Assael, ‘Music in the Air: Noise, Performers and the Contest over the Streets of the Mid-Nineteenth-Century Metropolis’, in *The Streets of London: From the Great Fire to the Great Stink*, ed. Tim Hitchcock and Heather Shore (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2003): 183–97; Martin Hewitt and Rachel Cowgill, eds, *Victorian Soundscapes*

criers and the grumpy middle-classes are centre-stage in the narratives of noise and how to combat it. This stage is international: the 'problems' of noise and music making in streets are found in Europe, the Americas and the colonized world. Indeed, research by the contributors to this volume, and recent research by Michael Allis (on travel literature) and Aimée Boutin (on Paris) show that the musical activities of nineteenth-century street musicians created a significant amount of public and personal concern virtually everywhere.⁴

But why is the pejorative term 'noise' used to describe the sonic landscape of the street? Why not 'sound' or even 'music'?⁵ Is it simply a matter of taste (informed by class and education) or does it represent a particular value ascribed to specific utterances or expressions of speech, sound waves and pitches? David Hendy provides a richly historical account of the dilemma, especially in relation to the nineteenth century. He writes that Hermann von Helmholtz's differentiation between 'noise' and 'musical tones' has contributed to a set of dualities that have persisted even until today: (1) noises versus music; (2) cacophony versus silence; (3) speech versus song.⁶ Hendy writes further of the phenomenon of 'social sound-proofing' in the well documented case of Thomas Carlyle, who went to extraordinary measures to sound proof his study.⁷ A second example is Charles Babbage, discussed in the first article of this special issue: Babbage tried to

Revisited (Leeds: Leeds Centre for Victorian Studies, 2007); Jerry White, *London in the Nineteenth Century: 'A Human Awful Wonder of God'* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2007); Derek B. Scott, *Sounds of the Metropolis: The 19th Century Popular Music Revolution in New York, Paris and Vienna* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008); Patrick Spedding and Paul Watt, eds, *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period*, 4 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011); David Hendy, *Noise: A Human History of Sound and Listening* (London: CCCO Books, 2013); David Atkinson and Steve Roud, eds, *Street Ballads in Nineteenth-Century Britain, Ireland, and North America: The Interface between Print and Oral Traditions* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise: Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015) and Anne Doggett, *A Far Cry: Town Crying in the Antipodes* (Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing, 2015). Literature dealing principally with noise, with peripheral reference to street music, includes Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985) and R. Murray Schafer, *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World* (Rochester, VT: Destiny Books, 1994).

⁴ Michael Allis, 'Travel writing', in *The Oxford Handbook of Music and Intellectual Culture in the Nineteenth Century*, ed. Paul Watt, Sarah Collins and Michael Allis (New York: Oxford University Press), forthcoming. Boutin, *City of Noise*.

⁵ Literature on street music inevitably discusses the opposition between sound and noise (see note 3, above). The literature in what might be loosely termed cultural studies is also extensive, but two examples that roundly problematize these concepts are Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises*, trans. Barclay Brown (New York: Pendragon, 1986) and Josh Epstein, *Sublime Noise: Musical Culture and the Modernist Writer* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2014).

⁶ Hendy cites Helmholtz from Emily Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity: Architectural Acoustics and the Culture of Listening in America, 1900–1933* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2004): 132. The work cited in Helmholtz's *Die Lehre von den Tonempfindungen als physiologische Grundlage für die Theorie der Musik* (Brunswick: Vieweg, 1863), translated into English by A.J. Ellis as *On the Sensations of Tone as a Physiological Basis for the Theory of Music* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1875). Douglas Kahn further explores the idea of sound versus musical sound in avant-garde and modernist music in his *Noise, Water, Meat: A History of Sound in the Arts* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001): 101–22 though it is not clear whether he draws on the Helmholtz's work.

⁷ Hendy, citing Picker, 'The Soundproof Study'.

persuade the British parliament to legislate against street musicians, ostensibly so his home could be rid of the din of street musicians. Underpinning these strident (some might say extreme) measures for acoustic isolation or escape, argued Hendy, is a romantic aesthetic of 'devout' and 'silent' forms of listening. These terms are taken from the Scottish-born American naturalist John Muir (1838–1914), who Hendy argued 'echoed a cry which reverberated right across the nineteenth century: a need for the sublime power of particular sounds to be experienced to their full effect'.⁸ Muir was referring, of course, to the sounds of the natural environment, but the term 'devout' also suggests that particular structures within a built environment – such as chapels and cathedrals – are havens from noise.

Two nineteenth-century writers on music, H.R. Haweis and George Bernard Shaw, appear unconcerned by the need for devout and silent listening when it came to the racket caused by street musicians. In his book, *Music and Morals*, H.R. Haweis pauses for thought over the fate of popular song: 'The songs of the temple have had more attention paid them than the songs of the street; but the time will come when these, too, will be understood as important factors in the life and morality of the people'.⁹ Haweis urged 'a few moments' calm consideration' on the role of the much-despised organ grinder in the annals of English musical history.¹⁰ And he further implored,

Let not those who write abusive letters to the newspapers, and bring bills to abolish street music, think they will be able to loosen the firm hold which the barrel-organist has over the British public. Your cook is his friend, your housemaid is his admirer; the policeman and the baker's young man look on him in the light of a formidable rival. But, for once, let us speak a good word for him.¹¹

Haweis argued for both a corrective history of London street music and a social history of street music and musicians, and for that history to move beyond portraying the usual negative stereotypes of the street musician.

George Bernard Shaw made similar points in an article in the *Dramatic Review* of 1886.¹² Shaw's musical journalism tended to centre on vocal music, especially opera, but he was no stranger to music across a huge range of repertory, including street music and music hall repertory. It is an important historical document because behind Shaw's usual sardonic and sarcastic tone he achieved two significant goals: he gave to posterity a list of some of the instruments and repertory used by street musicians and he took the sting out of the abuse hurled at them.

Shaw's article is a rare thing in that it provides detail on the musical instruments, some of them less well known today, used by street performers: cornets, flugelhorns, saxhorns, yellow ochre clarinets, a bombardon and bagpipes.

⁸ Hendy, *Noise*, 233 citing John Muir, *Our National Parks* (1901) in *The Eight Wilderness Discovery Books* (London: Diadem Books, 1992): 544.

⁹ H.R. Haweis, *My Musical Life* (London: W.H. Allen, 1884): 156.

¹⁰ Haweis, *Music and Morals* (London: Strahan and Co., 1871): 553.

¹¹ Haweis, *Music and Morals*, 554.

¹² George Bernard Shaw, 'Street music', *Dramatic Review*, 2 January 1886. Reproduced in *Shaw's Music*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: The Bodley Head, 1981): vol. 1, 437–40.

He noted that the brass instruments were fitted with cylinders rather than valves and looked 'German and cheap'.¹³ The performers and instruments played

the overture to *Tancredi*; the 'Lost Chord'; two selections of folk songs – one English and the other German; an *Iolanthe* fantasia; and several waltzes which baffle recognition, as the inner and bass parts are improvised by the performers, and the treble played from memory.¹⁴

Shaw's nod to the performers' technical expertise may be read as high praise. Indeed, Shaw argued, though a veiled critique of the opponents of street music performance, that street musicians had as much right to ply their trade as people had to go about their daily business: it was, after all, as Shaw explained, a personal right and legitimate economic activity. To ridicule the critics of street musicians Shaw proposed a number of ridiculous yet amusing measures such as muzzling the performers of wind instruments, confiscating and destroying bagpipes and regulating that amateur musicians should not be allowed to practice until they have received a diploma.

In another article on street music, from 1893, this time on the question of barrel organs, Shaw wrote more on the need to protect street musicians and to leave them well alone:

Let a short Act of parliament be passed, placing all street musicians outside the protection of the law; so that any citizen may assail them with stones, sticks, knives, pistols, or bombs without incurring any penalties – except, of course, in the case of the instrument itself being injured; for Heaven forbid that I should advocate any disregard of the sacredness of property, especially in the form of industrial capital! The effect of this would be that no man would dare play in the streets unless he were sure of being as universally attractive as Orpheus with his lute.¹⁵

Shaw seems to be little concerned with silence and the need for a noiseless street, recognizing that street musicians were a mainstay. But, along with Haweis, he was an early voice against social sound proofing, of a personal aesthetic getting in the way of accepting and allowing street musicians to ply their trade.

The aim of this special issue is to move away from (and in some cases contest) the narratives of noise in the street in the nineteenth century. The contributors to this volume were encouraged to examine how the street was used as sites of entertainment and commerce by a range of musicians – and would-be musicians – during daylight and darkness, summer and winter, fair weather and foul, and the use of the street by children, teenagers and adults. We emphasize that a streetscape is never static and it can be used for a wide variety of functions even on a single day. Discussions about street musicians often conjure images of bedraggled buskers and beggars but we often do not know from they came or to where they

¹³ Shaw, 'Street music', 437.

¹⁴ Shaw, 'Street music', 437–8.

¹⁵ George Bernard Shaw, 'The Barrel-Organ Question', *Morning Leader*, 27 November 1893 [signed 'C. di B']. Reproduced in *Shaw's Music*, ed. Dan H. Laurence (London: The Bodley Head, 1981): vol 3, 43–7; here 47.

were moving, despite the accents in which they spoke or sung, the instruments they played and the repertory they performed.

The articles in this special issue are essentially historical in nature, drawing on archival material such as letters, novels, photographs, acts of parliament, musical transcriptions, government records, letters and newspaper articles. The first article, by Paul Watt, 'Street Music in London in the Nineteenth Century: "Evidence" from Charles Dickens, Charles Babbage and Lucy Broadwood' questions some of the received ideas about street music, and argues that relying on conventional 'evidence' and privileging written sources over aural and visual ones (and literal interpretations of literature) can be misleading. The second article, by Michael Christoforidis, 'Serenading Spanish Students on the Streets of Paris: The International Projection of *Estudiantinas* in the 1870s' recounts how the *Estudiantinas* took Paris by storm, performing in a variety of street settings, reinforcing the exotic stereotypes of serenading musicians associated with Spain, and bringing to life historical notions of the Minstrel. Brass bands are the topics of articles three and four. Samantha Owens' "'Unmistakeable Sauerkrauts": Local Perceptions of Itinerant German Musicians in New Zealand, 1850–1920' examines the New Zealand public's changing perceptions of this particular brand of street musician from colonial times until shortly after the end of the First World War. In 'What Were the So-Called "German Bands" of Pre-World War I Australian Street-Life?' John Whiteoak applies social, cultural and musicological 'flesh and bones' to what has more or less remained the 'myth' of the ubiquitous 'German bands' (and their not always German bandmen) that sometimes entertained and charmed pedestrians while at other times represented a social and sonic blot on the streetscapes and public spaces of pre-World War I Australia.

The final article, by Bruce Johnson is, by design, a very different article to the (more or less) historically driven and topically discrete articles that come before it. In 'From Music to Noise: The Decline of Street Music' Johnson maps a broad musical, literary and visual trajectory, from pre-modern times to the present, that argues that live street music is an endangered species, either suppressed or trivialized as little more than 'local colour'. Johnson outlines 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. Coupled with this introduction (where similarly general aesthetic and political agendas of noise and music are discussed) these articles make appropriate 'bookends' to this volume.

Collectively, the articles in this special issue offer broader narratives about and historiographies of street music that go well beyond the reach of their individual topics. For example, it is evident that street musicians plied their trade not just for immediate pecuniary interest but also for advancement into the professional circuit in cinemas, theatres and concert halls. The kinds of instruments street musicians used varied across the world, as did their dress and shoes, and all of these changed or were modified depending upon local customs or the location where they performed. Street musicians also performed in urban spaces connected to streets (where space and recreation were also regulated), such as parks and gardens, and outside shops, taverns and clubs. Musicians moved about locally (even into the homes of local residents where they were employed for private parties) as well as nationally, and internationally, taking with them friends, family, their localized culture and new repertory. And they travelled far: thousands of German street musicians left Europe for Australia and New Zealand.

Travelling musicians could inspire awe and feelings of nostalgia in their new audiences across the globe, especially in fellow immigrants whom the music reminded of life at home in Europe. These musicians were also sometimes highly regarded, not only as performers but also as teachers. At the same time, however, they were often exoticized, or even sometimes racially and ethnically vilified. The articles also show how repertory ignited feelings of nostalgia and isolation in a globalizing world and the appropriation of musical style not just across genre and ensemble but also across contents. And such musical transmission inevitably implicates family, urban and transnational history, historiographies and questions about personal as well as regional identities.

And what of the history of street music today? Did the nineteenth century make street music silent, extinct? What effect did factors specific to the nineteenth century context, such as the rise in literacy and the changing urban environment, have on the nineteenth-century street musician? These articles attempt to canvass and to answer some of these pressing questions.

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