



6TH MARCH 2019

Live music and popular listening cultures in Britain, c1850–c1960

Dave Russell

Dave Russell taught in schools in Bradford and Leeds, at the University of Central Lancashire and at Leeds Metropolitan University from where he retired as Professor of History and Northern Studies in 2010; he is now an independent scholar. He is the author of *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914. A Social History* (1997, second edition), *Football and the English* (1997) and *Looking North. Northern England and the National Imagination* (2004), and numerous essays and articles on the history of popular culture. His current interests include the music profession, the guitar in the mid-twentieth century and opera as popular music.

Abstract

Exploring a number of concert and theatrical settings including music hall and variety, the working-man's club, popular classical concerts and brass band contests, this chapter examines popular listening behaviours in what might be termed a long Victorian century from 1850. While acknowledging that musical culture frequently transcended class boundaries (hence use of the label 'popular'), it focuses mainly on working-class listeners. It discusses the social and musical factors that structured listening habits and, while noting the continued existence of distinctive sub-cultures, attempts to chart overall trajectories and patterns of listening. It is argued that audiences generally became quieter and more disciplined over this period, although they were stubbornly resistant to concerted attempts to alter their behaviour and the pace of change was slow. The problems posed by popular audiences should not be exaggerated, however, as they invariably exhibited behaviour appropriate to both specific musical environments and musical genres. Overall, a tendency toward

respectful enthusiasm, politeness and attentiveness is arguably the hallmark of audience culture throughout the period. The emergence of new styles of youth culture from the 1950s, which sometimes appeared to involve not listening at all, marks a convenient endpoint for this discussion.

Introduction

Most exploration of the historical listening experience has been concerned with serious listening to serious music by members of the middle and upper classes.

[footnote] [1] James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1995). [footnote]

This chapter is much influenced by this rich body of work and, indeed, hopes to contribute to it. Certain genres considered here including oratorio and popular opera might interest those tracing the evolution of art music audiences as much (or more) as they do students of popular music: the boundaries of scholarship must be as permeable as the categories under study. However, its main aim is to augment recent attempts to give greater consideration to more obviously demotic genres and audiences. It does so through an overview of audience conduct during a ‘long’ Victorian century from about 1850 to 1960 in a wide variety of British popular theatrical, concert or quasi-concert settings including the concert hall, music hall and variety theatre, public house, working man’s club and brass band contest. These locations are indicative and findings might be different if street music, jazz clubs or any number of other forms were selected. Concentrating on what Simon Frith has identified as a key ‘listening argument’, that of ‘silence versus noise’ or, perhaps more specifically in this context, participation versus spectatorship, it aims to discern the factors influencing audience cultures and to identify any general behavioural trajectories that those cultures exhibited across the period.

[footnote] [2] Simon Frith, ‘More than meets the ear: on listening as social practice’ in Helen Barlow and David Rowland (eds) *Listening to Music: People, Practices and Experiences*, <http://ledbooks.org/proceedings2017> (Milton Keynes: Open University, 2017). [footnote]

Although alert to the complexities found within specific listening environments, the study is consciously wide-ranging both in terms of chronology and subject matter. While breadth risks generalisation and the obscuring of subtle variation, the benefits of such an approach are considerable. The periodisation allows for the charting of changes (or otherwise) within a set of popular musical activities that emerged in the

early Victorian years, reached maturity in the later nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries, and then moved to, or much closer to, the margins of national life by mid-century. In terms of content, institutions usually studied in isolation in fact shared a set of common problems in regard to how audiences should be attracted, entertained and policed and it is instructive to see how these issues were addressed across a broad musical field.

This was originally conceived as a study of working-class listeners and, in the urban-based, white, male form that they most frequently assumed over the period, they do remain at its heart. However, although class was fundamental to the shaping of musical life it could never dictate absolutely its final outcomes. While the public house, the working man's club and the band contest may have been almost exclusively proletarian in complexion, other arenas such as the music hall and popular theatre were more socially mixed with the exact balance varying between venues and over time. Again, working men formed often significant minorities at orchestral and even chamber concerts.

[footnote] [3] Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2/1997), pp. 41–48, 76–81, 235.

[/footnote]

The label 'popular' rather than 'working-class' has therefore been adopted, used in its sociological rather than aesthetic sense to capture a set of musical environments which, although often drawing a majority of their audience from the working class, frequently transcended class boundaries.



Figure 1: Oxford Music Hall 1875 (Source: By London Theatre Museum collection, Public Domain, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=19934650>)

Sources

Primary sources for such a study are scattered and fragmentary, although the emergence of digitised resources and particularly the ever-expanding [British Newspaper Archive](#) have certainly enhanced research opportunities in recent years. Moreover, given that popular audiences rarely described their own conduct and serious ethnographic accounts were largely unknown until the 1950s, our main ‘earwitnesses’ are the critics, social commentators and recreational reformers whose writings, especially but not exclusively in the Victorian period, were often engaged polemics rooted in wider class-inflected debates. Although there was much thoughtful and nuanced commentary, working-class listeners were all too easily constructed as either rowdy villains or quiet heroes. A mid-nineteenth century Leeds music-hall audience, observed by a Baptist minister ‘gaping with gusto on scenes, and listening with delight to sounds, which to us, at least, were both humiliating and appalling’, stood at one extreme, clear evidence of the need for the wholesale cleansing of popular recreation.

[footnote] [4] *Leeds Mercury*, 13 December 1851. [/footnote]

At the other were ‘the earnest and intelligent working man’ found hovering outside a cathedral choral festival and wondering ‘whether the ladies and gentleman that come in their carriages to hear the music think as much of it as I should’; the audience at a popular concert in Bridgewater, mainly composed of brickyard labourers and deemed by the organisers ‘more quiet and attentive than some who occupy a higher social position’; and the occupants of the cheap seats at a Leeds ballad concert disturbed by a noisy mass exit by their social superiors:

Those people, too, who had paid their money at the doors and who could not boast of carriages and front seats, had a right to demand that silence should be preserved until the concert came to an end.

[footnote] [5] *Musical Times*, December 1878, pp. 660–661; *Musical Times*, October 1881, p. 529; *Yorkshireman*, 2 November 1878. [/footnote]

These serious listeners, in their turn, were vehicles for various, sometimes radical, discourses seeking to highlight supposed middle- and upper-middle class philistinism. Used judiciously, these rich bodies of material tell us much but scholars must always guard against becoming their prisoners rather than their interpreters.

Listening cultures

While space does not allow a fully systematic discussion of listening cultures, in what follows they are seen as the product of constant interplay and creative tension between audience demand and musical product. That demand was built, in James Johnson's felicitous phrase, on an 'horizon of expectation' that amalgamated personal taste, historical practice and collective cultural tradition.

[footnote] [6] See Johnson, 1995, p. 5. [/footnote]

It was frequently influenced, especially in commercial settings, by a 'moral economy' which provided a sense of obligation to audiences in terms of the nature, duration and quality of performance. The central component of the 'supply' side was obviously the music offered and it is essential that the 'music itself' remains close to the heart of any analysis; cultural history can too easily become only a matter of context. Nevertheless, other factors were central in defining the range of possibilities within which the music could be enjoyed and reactions to it expressed. Johnson has identified two critical influences, namely the wider social formations and relationships that defined acceptable behaviours and the more immediate physical and physiological stimuli and constraints provided by particular venues and their underpinning ideologies. These were to prove as critical to popular as to art music.

[footnote] [7] See Johnson, 1995, p. 4. [/footnote]

Forming a bridge between demand and supply were the specialist critics and wider cultural commentators noted above and whose comments upon, and attempts to influence, audience demeanour, were ultimately dependent upon ideological and artistic preference. Although audiences undoubtedly found champions amongst their number, their combined weight probably tilted toward those managements and performers seeking in some way to reform and alter existing habits.

Disputes between audiences and managements or organisers were inevitable but most were relatively easily resolved, glossed over or prosecuted by a kind of guerrilla warfare by audiences that eventually petered out as its protagonists were replaced by new generations. Serious confrontation was rare and most likely to occur when significant change was mooted in a commercial setting in which the power balance was delicately poised. In locations such as the club concert room where audiences were socially homogenous and collective habits well established, problems were generally manageable. However, in the Edwardian variety theatre when managements sought to change the nature of performance in order to engineer an upward shift in social tone, such resolution, as will be seen, was less straightforward. Difficulties could also occur where different etiquettes collided – brass band followers could be forced to share

park space with casual bystanders and the ‘yells and horseplay...of dirty little boys and girls and “raffy” youths’ – or where music was performed in an inappropriate venue. The 1950s produced some of the clearest examples of when music that encouraged dancing was held in venues such as cinemas that required sitting, while other forms that required listening were held in dance halls.

[footnote] [8] *The Yorkshireman*, 3 August 1878, p. 65; Simon Frith et al., *The History of Live Music in Britain*, vol. 1. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing, 2013), p. 181. [/footnote]

Listening aloud

Although James Johnson’s ground-breaking *Listening in Paris* has been criticised both for underestimating pre-existing habits of silent listening and exaggerating the extent of their eventual triumph, there can be little doubt that in the period from about 1750 art music audiences did indeed increasingly ‘stop talking and start listening’.

[footnote] [9] See Johnson, 1995, p. 1. [/footnote]

As a later section will demonstrate, a parallel process gradually took shape amongst the popular audiences that had begun to coalesce around new entertainment forms from the mid-century (examining the listening habits they imported from earlier periods remains an important research task). This, however, was, often more a matter of a move to quieter rather than silent listening. Audiences had always been perfectly capable of silent listening when appropriate, but in many contexts silence would have been self-denyingly perverse and downright rude to the performers. Particularly in the Victorian period and in many contexts thereafter, enjoyment (or disapproval) was to be registered audibly and various moments in performance appropriated for public intervention. It is this process of active, participatory and engaged listening that is considered first.

Beyond the organised music-hall clagues that wrought disorder if performers failed to meet their financial demands, audiences were rarely genuinely and deliberately disruptive.

[footnote] [10] Dagmar Kift, *The Victorian Music Hall. Culture, Class and Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 70. [/footnote]

Political and cultural tensions could spark serious confrontations, as at the Leeds Hippodrome in 1913 when Jewish patrons took exception to J. P. Ling’s comic song, ‘The ragtime cowboy Jew’, but such manifestations were unusual.

[footnote] [11] *Yorkshire Post*, 6 May 1913 [/footnote]

Many music halls were undoubtedly the site of youthful, masculine sub-cultures which much prized certain levels of unruliness involving jeering and the throwing of objects at the stage to show disapproval. Neville Cardus, eventually one of the most distinguished of British music critics, remembered how in early Edwardian Manchester, ‘a small company of us boys housed in bathless, unlavatoried Rusholme and Moss Side’ clubbed together to buy eggs to aim at unsatisfactory performers at the Tivoli Theatre of Varieties.

[footnote] [12] Neville Cardus, *Full Score* (London: Cassell, 1970), p. 31. [/footnote]

Audiences were also sometimes extremely harsh on those believed, fairly or otherwise, not to have delivered value for money, with the ballad concerts of the leading British tenor, Sims Reeves (1821–1900) a particular target. Reeves, although hugely popular with audiences, was famously reluctant to provide encores at a time when audiences often demanded them to excess and, from the 1860s, his consistent refusal to give other than minimal satisfaction became coupled with an increased tendency to cancel concerts at short notice. Although probably dictated by genuine health issue, a drink problem was widely believed to be the cause and audiences clearly determined to extract the maximum value when he did actually sing. At the end of his performance at Victoria Hall, Leeds in 1876, for example, sections of the audience were soon ‘applauding, stamping their feet, whistling and [unsuccessfully] shouting for his reappearance’ and refused to cease when the next performer took the stage, with the result that the remainder of the concert was eventually abandoned. This pattern of events was repeated on at least four occasions at Manchester (1867), Newcastle (1878), Exeter (1882) and Liverpool (1886), while other lower-level demonstrations were frequent occurrences during his tours.

[footnote] [13] *Leeds Mercury*, 10 October 1876; *Era*, 3 November 1867; Charles E. Pearce, *Sims Reeves. Fifty Years of Music in England* (London: Stanley Paul, 1924), p. 302; *Reynold’s Newspaper*, 17 December 1882; *Era*, 16 October 1886. [/footnote]

Significantly, younger male patrons were once again responsible for such disruptions. The perpetrators were probably both older than Cardus and his music-hall friends and sometimes from a higher social class. Although Reeves did attract working-class audiences, at Leeds at least, the minimum entry of 1/6d would have excluded almost all working-class patrons and the ‘exuberant youths’ were likely to have been lower-middle and middle-class ‘swells’, young-men-about town apeing upper-class bohemian culture. Although the exact nature of rowdy audience behaviour may have been shaped by class, an aggressive masculinity was invariably at its heart. It was not until the pop concerts of the 1950s that young women’s voices really began to play their parts in shaping live listening culture in significant ways.

In general, these masculine sub-cultural styles were precisely that and did not constitute standard audience practice. In the nineteenth and early twentieth-century what was often reported as audience intrusion was essentially a desire to have some form of control over proceedings, to be involved and to express a view. Particularly earlier in the period audiences expected to move in and out of and within venues, with ease, and to smoke, eat and drink wherever possible. As already noted, ill-timed entry and egress could be highly problematic as was the taking of refreshment, especially if audiences were hearing music in a setting where it was not normally performed. A Good Friday *Messiah* performance in an east London theatre, for example, saw, albeit ‘a very few’ patrons, unable to ‘abstain from letting corks fly from bottles containing effervescing liquors during some of the finest passages’.

[footnote] [14] *The Era*, 17 April 1870. [/footnote]

Above all, audiences wanted to be heard, both by their immediate neighbours (in musical comedy and light opera the overture was still sometimes seen as an opportunity for the continuation of chatting rather than its point of cessation well in to the 1930s), by the wider audience and, above all, by those on stage.

[footnote] [15] *Musical Opinion*, November 1933, p. 129. [/footnote]

Historians of music hall have long recognised the easy intimacy often established between audience and performer but, while the halls probably saw this at its most marked level, it was a feature of popular musical life more widely. Interjection by individual audience members was a common and significant expression of this. Sometimes it was simply a matter of startled response to action on stage, as when a young female Bradford galleryite greeted the death of a character in Benedict’s opera *The Lily of Killarney*, by giving ‘a mighty shriek and exclaim[ing] “He’s shot him!”’

[footnote] [16] J. C. Handby, *History of Opera in Bradford, 1856–1926* (Bradford, 1926), pp. 40–41. [/footnote]

More commonly, it took the form of admonition, encouragement or personal observation. The young Sims Reeves was told to ‘sing up lad!’ in Bradford in 1848 while, at a ‘People’s Concert’ in Halifax six years later, a member of the gallery was loudly cheered after shouting out ‘That’s true’ during a rendition of ‘Home, Sweet Home’. The local newspaper found this actually quite endearing and was far more troubled by the frequent whistling ‘more shrill and piercing than ever’ despite warning notices to the contrary.

[footnote] [17] G. F. Sewell, *The History of the Bradford Festival Choral Society* (Bradford, 1907), pp. 32–33; *Halifax Guardian*, 18 February, 1854. [/footnote]

Here was a sense of ownership, of familiarity with the performers that proclaimed the audiences to be valid and valued participants in proceedings.

Displays of enthusiasm or otherwise were obviously the most pronounced form of such engagement. Some measure of applause was the least a performer could expect but popular audiences demonstrated levels of enthusiasm, inappropriately so in the eyes of many critics, that ranged well beyond conventional politeness. Loud applause (sometimes combined with whistling and stamping) whether in anticipation of a high note, during its execution or after its completion, was commonly noted in reviews of concerts and of both popular opera and oratorio as was a more general habit of applauding at the end of individual arias and choruses. Interestingly, chorus members were sometimes called to account for joining in such activity. Discussing a *Messiah* performance in 1896, one Yorkshire-based critic felt that while ‘the Philistinism of the audience...must be taken as a matter of course’, the Dewsbury Choral Society really ‘should have set a better example in this matter than they did last night.’

[footnote] [18] Yorkshire Post, 23 December 1896. [/footnote]

Jeers and boos or simply bored outbreaks of chatter and early exit formed the contrary critical response in most performance genres, with music hall audiences probably the hardest to please, although those attending events aimed at their mental and/or moral improvement were not slow in demonstrating that ‘inappropriate’ behaviour and ‘inappropriate’ content were closely related. Visiting London’s People’s Palace in 1889, George Bernard Shaw found music utterly unsuited to the building and the occasion:

In the concert-room some unfortunate artists were bawling ballads in the vain hope of gaining the attention of a vast audience. But the thing was impossible: the place was too big. Hundreds of young people loafed and larked, or stared and wandered in and out, at the end of the room.

[footnote] [19] Percy M. Young, The Concert Tradition from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1965), pp. 230–231. [/footnote]

The call for an encore, invariably demanded during rather than at the end, or at a suitable break in performance, was the most important but also most problematic element of audience involvement. It is no surprise that so many Victorian critics regularly coupled the words ‘encore’ and ‘nuisance’. Singers, contracted and paid for a certain number of songs, could be pushed beyond acceptable physical limits by audience demands. Schedules were disrupted by the additional material with some audience members therefore forced to leave for final trains and trams before the conclusion of a performance; counter-encore demonstrations were understandably not infrequent. Encores became an acute organisational problem for music hall as it evolved into twice-nightly variety shows that demanded precise timings in the first-house in order to allow prompt entry at the second. Particularly in opera and oratorio,

dramatic tension and artistic integrity were at risk of being compromised by calls for repeats. As one twentieth-century musician wearily observed in the context of opera, if ‘the character...is made to die twice, it matters little’.

[footnote] [20] Thomas Russell, ‘On audiences’, *Musical Times*, February 1941, pp. 54–56. [/footnote]

However, for audience and performer alike, encores, perhaps even more than ticket sales, were the best evaluation of success, pleasurable and effectively free entertainment for the former, the stuff of press notices and reputation-building for the latter. For the most part, they were generously requested and often equally generously granted.

The restrained audience

While noisy galleries, encores and other displays of enthusiasm were never to disappear, it is not difficult to discern an underlying move toward increasing levels of restraint. It was a slow and uneven process both across the period and between different genres and it was perhaps not until the 1930s that a visitor from the early Victorian era would have sensed really noteworthy changes. Moreover, by 1950, new patterns were emerging as crooners and balladeers, then rock and rollers and finally pop stars *per se* became the object of noisy, highly interventionist audience engagement from within youth culture. Nevertheless, although far more research is required, evidence currently available would suggest that by the inter-war period and with accelerating force from that point, not only the opportunity but also the desire for engaged involvement had diminished.

The variety theatres that increasingly supplanted music hall from the 1890s illustrated this most markedly. Controlled by syndicates anxious to reach new ‘respectable’ markets in the form of more women and socially-mixed clienteles, their managements sought to replace comic singers with circus-style acts, theatrical sketches and the new genre of revue. Architectural shifts, with the sale of alcoholic drinks either banished altogether or located in foyer bars, and the full adoption of theatrical seating rather than ‘cabaret’ style tables serviced by waiters, tended to fix audiences in one place for long periods. Taken together, these artistic and structural changes significantly altered the dynamic between stage and audience and increasingly generated what Frith has termed ‘secondary listening’, whereby music was essentially subsidiary to visual spectacle.

[footnote] [21] Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986); see Frith, 2017. [/footnote]

Changes on a rather less dramatic scale could also be seen in other areas. In 1936, one Scottish commentator expressed pleasure that:

an oratorio is no longer punctuated with bursts of applause, and such a thing as the repetition of a number in an opera is almost unheard of, even in the holiday atmosphere of a Saturday night.

[footnote] [22] *The Scotsman*, 27 February 1936.
[/footnote]

It is difficult to chart their exact chronology and extent. Thomas Russell's wry observation on double dying was made five years after this claim. In 1933, the critic, Herbert Thompson, always fierce in his defence of the artistic and spiritual sanctity of oratorio, met a Leeds *Messiah* audience's applause for Mary Jarred's rendition of 'He was despised' with the rebuke that 'there is no excuse for such barbarism'. The next year, audiences at neighbouring Bradford were chastised for 'applauding everything indiscriminately' during the same work.

[footnote] [23] *Yorkshire Post*, 21 December 1933; 13 December 1934.
[/footnote]

Nevertheless, even Thompson admitted in his 1933 notice that 'much progress has been made in latter years' and by 1947, a reviewer in a north-eastern paper talked of a *Messiah* enjoyed in 'the newer traditional manner, no encores', suggestive, perhaps, that a properly 'silent' listening had largely been established in the field of oratorio by this stage.

[footnote] [24] *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail*, 18 December 1947.
[/footnote]

There were certainly genres that remained immune, with Savoy opera, both professional and amateur, still strongly imbued with an encore culture. One critic noted that the audience at a D'Oyly Carte *Princess Ida* in Birmingham in 1932 'seemed insatiable and the company only too painfully eager to oblige', while another savoured a film version of *The Mikado* and thus the pleasurable and 'unprecedented experience' of hearing the work 'unhampered by the "encore nuisance"'.

[footnote] [25] *Birmingham Daily Gazette*, 2 January 1932; *Liverpool Daily Post*, 12 January 1939. [/footnote]

Overall trends, however, were clear.

Listening cultures were reshaped or reformed only rarely by either exhortation – warning notices in programmes or on theatre walls seem to have been substantially ignored – or forcible imposition. The Edwardian variety theatre was something of an exception to this, with strictures on audience behaviour sometimes reinforced

aggressively by evictions and bans carried out by managers, uniformed commissionaires and sometimes even the police. Such tactics could provoke resistance, with attempts by the manager of south-east London's New Cross Empire to introduce dress codes, limit whistling and prevent 'unparliamentary language' in the gallery, met with vocal hostility and even physical force. In one extreme incident, he was attacked with a knife by a patron (a slaughterman by trade) that he had tried to eject; the man served six months in prison and reportedly returned as an ally in the battle for order.

[footnote] [26] Era, 29 July 1905. [/footnote]

There were echoes of such tactics in the clumsy attempts to curtail the dancing that accompanied live rock 'n' roll performances in cinemas and other supposedly static environments the 1950s.

In general, however, the majority of audiences, variety or otherwise, did not need a punitive environment in order to conform to new expectations. Most significant alterations in audience behaviour were more usually the result of a gradual evolution in collective mentalities structured by the internalisation of new modes of public behaviour in society more widely and subtler forms of persuasion within the specific context of musical performance. Much change was doubtless the result of a 'civilising process' that saw individuals become ever more subject to the regulatory frameworks of urban-industrial life, brought forth by factors as varied as the workplace, school, enhanced consumer power, increased privatisation of domestic life and the marginalisation of older, rowdier and unpredictable forms of popular culture. Within the narrower arena of popular leisure, technological change may have helped reconfigure listening habits. From the late 1920s, 'talkies' made cinemas quieter places, with sound removing the need for the literate young to read out captions for illiterate or semi-literate friends and family, thereby establishing a less participatory audience engagement. (Like variety theatres, larger, city-centre cinemas were also highly regulated in comparison with older, community-based locations.) Gramophone and wireless had, in their turn, the potential to give a focus and intensity to the private listening experience that could translate to the public sphere. This is, admittedly, very speculative and some accounts of broadcasting even as late as the 1950s noted precisely the opposite tendency with wireesses left on almost permanently and issuing music indiscriminately.

[footnote] [27] Norman Dennis, Fernando Henriques and Clifford Slaughter, Coal is our Life (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1956), p. 168. [/footnote]

Whatever the case, the relationship between private and public listening provides a potentially fertile area for future study.

Within the field of live music, reform was largely a matter of incremental generational change. As variety became established, audiences increasingly knew what was expected of them. Within concert life broadly defined, prosaic but important organisational alterations emerging over the twentieth century including a reduction in the duration of concerts, imposition of strict starting and finishing times, insistence upon tightly defined intervals and restrictions on entry during performances, at the very least limited the problems of noisy movement and may well have generated a wider sense of order. The strictures of music critics demanding more disciplined habits possibly helped create a general atmosphere in which change could occur and, more fundamentally, they were often indicative of an increasing concern within the music profession about the need to maintain the artistic and intellectual integrity of the musical work. It was the steady but generally non-confrontational application of such thinking that had the biggest influence on listening culture. Although the detailed chronology is again unclear, for much of the nineteenth century, for example, it was common for conductors to accept the reprise of several pieces of an opera or oratorio during a performance. Gradually that number was reduced so as to allow only repetition of those items that custom and practice had rendered almost obligatory. During a Carl Rosa visit to Dundee in 1928, an encore of the 'The Soldier's Chorus', long a popular favourite, was 'the only one permitted by [conductor] Aylmer Buesst' during the performance of *Faust*. The next night, while the similarly prized 'Toreador's Song' from *Carmen* was reprised, the called for 'double encore...was denied'.

[footnote] [28] *Dundee Courier*, 28 and 29 February 1928. [/footnote]

Audiences were still indulged but within ever more constrained boundaries that new listeners swiftly came to understand as norms.

Polite listening

It would be unfortunate if the foregoing exploration of listening behaviours and the role played by external influences in shaping them should obscure the extent to which popular audiences were always highly active agents in the making of their musical experiences. What is so striking from this perspective is not the problematic nature of audiences but their strong tendency to polite behaviour and, where necessary, their willingness to display the quiet, concentrated listening that was at the core of much working-class and popular listening.

This was certainly the case in the concert hall, whether for the small working-class minority that patronised orchestral concerts or the larger numbers found, often with scores in hand, at vocal or choral events. Although the danger of taking positive

commentary at face value has been acknowledged, there is simply too much testimony to the ‘most orderly’ behaviour, and ‘most wonderful discretion...in applause’ of the type experienced by the conductor and flautist, Edward de Jong, at his Manchester concerts in the 1880s, for them to be viewed as anything other than a central current within popular musical life.

[footnote] [29] See Percy M. Young, *The Concert Tradition from the Middle Ages to the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, Kegan, Paul, 1965), pp. 227–228. [/footnote]

Johnson’s question as to why audiences ‘stopped talking and starting listening’ may indeed be basically irrelevant to working-class concert-goers, bringing with them as many did, powerful cultural and economic motives for self-discipline. Many will have been keen amateur musicians imbued with the traditions of courteous listening common to much voluntary music-making from the eighteenth century. Beyond any such considerations of mutual respect, many early amateur choirs, bands and other groups also had strict codes of etiquette reinforced by monetary fines and penalties. Although these were often related to attendance, bad language and the misuse of instruments and other resources, it is likely that the disciplines imposed translated into a wider respect for taking music seriously and observing expected codes.

[footnote] [30] See Russell, 1997, p. 195. [/footnote]

The simple economic imperative, however, was probably the most powerful factor. Attendance at concerts often involved costs that were ill-afforded and journeys on foot that could be long and arduous.

[footnote] [31] See Russell, 1997, p. 191. [/footnote]

Why talk and undermine such sacrifices? For working men, unlike many of their social superiors, attendance at concerts was not an obligation or an opportunity to be seen. It was ultimately a serious aesthetic affair.

Although working-class concert-goers only ever constituted a small minority within their wider communities, serious, quiet listening, albeit not necessarily of the same duration or intensity, could also be found much more widely in such initially unlikely locations as the music hall, public house and working men’s club. As suggested above, much formal working-class culture was highly rule-bound by codes of conduct that reflected and reinforced broadly-agreed collective concepts of fairness, decency and, especially, respectability, a form of cultural capital absolutely central to larger battles over the gaining of political rights and reforms. Many aspects of popular listening were governed precisely by these codes, some of which were self-imposed, others requiring the intervention of an authority figure. Central here was the chairman, an individual variously imposed, elected or simply paid to keep order and ensure that performers could be heard. Although even the best chairmen might sometimes fail, he (always) was

key to ensuring that early music halls were never the chaotic sites inhabiting the imaginations of their more extreme critics.

[footnote] [32] See Kift, 1996, pp. 69–70; Jeremy Crump, ‘Provincial music hall: promoters and public in Leicester, 1863–1929’, in Peter Bailey (ed.), *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), p. 59. [/footnote]

Many chairmen were the owners or managers of halls and their desire for control ultimately derived from commercial motives rather than popular mentalities. Nevertheless, the significant point is that audiences generally accepted their role and appreciated the purported philosophy behind it.

Although the chairman began to disappear from the music hall as the industry developed along new organisational lines, much music in pubs and clubs continued under their control for the remainder of the period. Musical performance in such places came in various guises, ranging from the ‘free and easy’ in which customers took turns to sing, to concerts, some free or available at only nominal cost, and the full scale variety performances that were emerging in working men’s clubs and commercial ‘cabaret’ clubs from the late 1950s. The exact dynamics of audience expectation and behaviour will have varied accordingly, but the presence of a chairman, Master of Ceremonies or, more fashionably from the 1950s, compère, armed with a set of rules and/or a widely accepted set of customary practices, was a fixed element. At a Victorian temperance public house in Leeds run by the British Workman movement, attendees at the free and easy paid small fines of 1/2d to 1d for a range of offences including swearing, not wearing a hat, refusing to sing when asked and talking after the chairman had called order.

[footnote] [33] *Bradford Observer*, 9 February 1871. [/footnote]

Temperance institutions may well have demanded a higher standard of behaviour than most, but the British Workman pubs drew heavily on standard drinking cultures and such rules were probably not untypical. Some eighty years later in the same city, the cultural theorist Richard Hoggart recorded the basic mechanics of listening at a free and easy in a working-man’s club. Breaking into the general backdrop of piano playing, individuals:

would rise and move to the piano, probably urged on by friends. There will be firm cries of ‘order please!’; the servers stop clattering; the company becomes still and looks towards the piano – and the singer delivers his contribution.

[footnote] [34] Richard Hoggart, *The Uses of Literacy* (originally published, 1957, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973 ed., p. 154.) [/footnote]

There can be no doubt that the chairman might have to fight his audience as he desperately tried to hold a line. This is well captured in the work of sociologist Norman Dennis and his colleagues whose discussion of mining culture in the early 1950s includes one of the first scholarly ethnographic accounts of working-class listening. Their subject matter was a Saturday night concert in a working men's club in the Yorkshire town of Featherstone at which the audience initially appeared to be relatively pliant and accommodating:

8.15. 'The concert-room is full. There are about 160 people present. There are as many women as men, and all age groups above 18 are well-represented. The Master of Ceremonies rings the bell and thanks the audience several times until there is silence. D. H. sings 'Memories' and the audience loudly claps his indifferent performance, stamping and shouting. The bell rings, 'Thank you, some order please! D. H. then sings Some enchanted evening.'

However, as drink and conversation begin to flow, within 45 minutes:

The Master of Ceremonies found it increasingly difficult to secure the required degree of silence. It is as if the performance was quite subsidiary to social intercourse, and was indeed used merely to facilitate it by filling in the gaps in the conversation... Between the songs there is a hubbub of conversation. Many join in the choruses as the artist sings.

[footnote] [35] Norman Dennis et al., pp. 146–147. [/footnote]

Crucially, however, order never does break down, with the Master of Ceremonies determined that those wishing to listen should be able to do so and that the singer has to be given a full opportunity to perform. The main 'hubbub' is between and not during songs and the desire for noisy release takes the form of chorus singing. Some acts were doubtless sufficiently poor, ill-suited or unlucky to be beyond rescue and singer Elaine Delmar's recall of one 1960s chairman requesting a club audience to 'to give the poor cow a chance' shows, *inter alia*, how unpleasant situations could become.

[footnote] [36] Dave Haslam, *Life After Dark* (London: Simon and Schuster, 2015), p. 76. [/footnote]

Nevertheless, much popular listening was marked by good intentions and a not inconsiderable level of respect.

The power of music

Important as individual leaders and arbiters were in structuring popular listening, audiences were perfectly capable of being quiet without being guided by anything other than a personal or collective response to the music offered to them. James Johnson and others have made a convincing case for the powerful role of particular composers – Gluck in opera, Beethoven in orchestral music, for example – in encouraging a new attentiveness in art music audiences. On the other hand, within popular music, whether defined aesthetically or sociologically, it was arguably genre rather than composer that dictated the listening response. Many forms of popular music were met quietly and attentively because personal enjoyment and accepted etiquette demanded it: even the liveliest music-hall song demanded close concentration on first encounter. However, certain forms seem to have exerted a particular power and set of expectations, and most important was the raft of music that a relative of Richard Hoggart's once memorably described as 'music that meks yer want to give all yer money away'.

[footnote] [37] See Hoggart, 1957, p. 164. [/footnote]

As late as the 1960s, sociologist Brian Jackson noted the power of 'the generalized "religious" sentiment of much working man's music' (an important reminder of a key continuity in popular taste).

[footnote] [38] Brian Jackson, *Working-Class Community* (originally published 1968, Harmondsworth, Pelican, 1972 ed., p. 36. [/footnote]

Such music included actual religious pieces such as hymns and excerpts from popular oratorios but also secular items including popular operatic arias, show tunes such as *Carousel's* 'You'll never walk alone' (1945), or 'Danny Boy/Londonderry Air' (lyrics, 1913), 'Bless this house' (1927) and similar popular ballads and songs. All were linked by an ability to induce a transcendent mood amongst audiences. Given adequate performance, such material long had the capacity to induce quiet and contemplation amongst audiences and not merely in the concert hall. The music hall and variety theatre spawned a sub-genre of 'sentimental', 'operatic' or 'ballad vocalists' such as Charlotte Lauri, 'listened to with the respectful attention which her superior ability as a sentimental vocalist entitles her to' at Crowder's Music Hall, Greenwich in 1877 and Lillian Alexander, whose repertoire included the enormously popular religious ballad, 'The Holy City' (1892). Although the song was seen as 'rather incongruous with her surroundings...her fine singing, deep earnestness and handsome exterior commend[ed] her' to an audience at London's Tivoli where she was 'warmly applauded'.

[footnote] [39] *Era*, 9 September 1877; 9 March 1895; 21 December 1895. [/footnote]

Similar audience responses can be identified in pubs and clubs. One regular customer of a pub music room in Hulme, Manchester in the late 1940s recalled a ‘lady pianist who had a lovely voice and almost every Saturday night she was asked to sing the aria “One fine day”. Everyone present always listened in absolute silence’.

[footnote] [40] Bob Potts, *The Old Pubs of Hulme and Chorlton-on-Medlock* (Swinton: Neil Richardson, 1997), pp. 13–14. [/footnote]

In the mid-1960s, the journalist Graham Turner encountered a similar response from an audience at Greasbrough Club, in south Yorkshire, then arguably the leading popular cabaret venue in the country:

The next turn was Delightful Susan Lane, the Lovely Lady of Song. She turned out to be a much better than average performer of semi-operatic numbers, and soon had the audience in awed and appreciative silence... [A member of the audience] began to hum in a fruity baritone, but an old man at the table raised his forefinger reverentially to his lips.

[footnote] [41] Graham Turner, *The North Country* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1967), pp. 251–252. [/footnote]

Critical to the power of such material was its connection with the trained voice and the rich accretions of what John Potter has termed ‘vocal authority’ that it garnered from association with the church and serious elements of art music, both sacred and secular.

[footnote] [42] John Potter, *Vocal Authority* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998). [/footnote]

Throughout the period singers in popular concerts, pubs and clubs were billed in terms of their vocal register, with the tenor voice in particular a vital component within mainstream musical taste. While exuberant and sometimes excessive response might greet such singers on completion of a performance, the structures of feeling generated by the marriage of their voices and the quasi-religious sensibility of their music made silent listening common currency. The public house and the social club were hardly imbued with the ‘undistracted communion’ of the concert hall but they were certainly capable of generating sacral moments.

[footnote] [43] See Johnson, 1995, pp. 284–285. [/footnote]

Serious talking

Historiographical emphasis and contemporary habit lead, often quite rightly, to the equation of serious with silent listening and the current narrative is tending strongly in that direction. However, serious talking can also be an entirely valid audience response and any survey trying to capture the complexities of popular behaviour should acknowledge its widespread nature. Critical running commentary took place in all forms of popular music but it arguably reached its apotheosis in the brass band contest. Musical competition is something of an outlier within this study, a highly specialised site of ‘concert’ listening in which much of the audience comprised expert practitioners, some of whom were actually participants in the event. However, the importance of banding (and other competitive forms) to popular musical culture and the light it sheds on the nature of specialist listening justifies its inclusion.

Contest audiences were never entirely peaceful. Although it was a relative rarity, events could sometimes be disrupted by protests and disorderly displays as viewers reacted to perceived chicanery by bands (importing illegal players, for example) or even adjudicators; the prevalence of gambling on outcomes only added to inevitable annoyance that stemmed from wounded artistic pride.

[footnote] [44] See Russell, 1997, pp. 225–227. [/footnote]

Overall, however, external observers were more frequently impressed by the high levels of attentiveness, with the *Daily News*’s description of the 1907 Crystal Palace National contest arguing that:

The old Meistersingers were not more earnest in their cult of modes and tones than these working-men musicians...the crowd – score in hand – followed the performances with an accuracy of knowledge and judgement which bore out in striking measure the elaborate and careful estimates of the professional judges.

[footnote] [45] *British Bandsman*, 5 October 1907.

[/footnote]

Such earnestness probably did not translate into silent listening, however. Ironically, those audience scores, the ultimate indication of serious and scholarly purpose, were themselves a cause of noise, so large and unwieldy that when turned in unison, ‘it sounded like a flock of birds flying over’

[footnote] [46] Arthur Taylor, *Labour and Love* (London: Elm Tree, 1983), p. 29. [/footnote]

More fundamentally, by the 1960s and almost certainly much earlier, a vigorous tradition of verbal commentary was well established. At the highly prestigious 1962 Open Contest at Belle Vue, Manchester, which drew an audience of at least 3–4,000:

Silence was not demanded. A band came on the platform, its conductor waited for the quietest moment he could, and then began. The audience discussed the conductor, criticized soloists, argued about correct intonation, suggested marks. Throughout the day there was a perpetual activity of assessment – a general thinking out aloud...In a poorer performance, part of the audience disappeared behind newspapers. You could tell the common assessment by watching the newspapers come up or go down.

[footnote] [47] See Jackson, 1968, p. 36. [/footnote]

On this occasion, the audience's opinions did not accord with the 'careful estimates' of the judges and the results were greeted with 'stunned silence, then cries of anger, disagreement and astonishment'. Applause for the winners was 'very restrained' and the wrong notes hit when they played a valedictory piece 'set everyone in a happier mood'

[footnote] [48] See Jackson, 1968, p. 37. [/footnote]

Here was a style of serious listening rooted as much, perhaps, in sporting as musical culture, and in which conversation could be a far more important symbol of respect and appreciation than silence, especially if the latter was accompanied by descent behind a newspaper. Arguably the most telling point, however, emerges when this rich ethnographic account (by Denis Marsden) moves on to describe a visit to a slow melody contest, a highly specialised event in which unaccompanied solos were played before a far smaller, specialist audience. In this case, those present 'listened with closed eyes, beating time with fingers or conducting quietly with one hand.'

[footnote] [49] See Jackson, 1968, p. 31. [/footnote]

Grunts of approval or otherwise were sometimes audible at such competitions but appreciation of the intense artistic and mental demands placed on the contestants made them ultimately a site of quiet concentration. As so often was the case with popular listening more generally, here was a precise understanding of the etiquette required.

Conclusion

By the 1950s and 1960s, much of the essentially Victorian musical world discussed here was coming to an end, rapidly dissolving into myriad sub-cultures and overshadowed by the dominant culture of pop and rock. Brass bands and choral societies, already much diminished in cultural power, moved further to the margins, unable to unite and invigorate communities as they once had. Variety, although still

alive in clubs and pubs, was no longer a recognisable industry. Popular opera as live entertainment was effectively dead and the trained voice, while still audible, could no longer engage fully with popular audiences ever more attuned to new, often Americanized vocal styles in which, as one commentator noted of a Bill Haley concert, musicians were now often ‘playing against an audience...rather than to it’.

[footnote] [50] *Manchester Guardian*, 7 February 1957. [/footnote]

The century of popular musical culture from 1850 was complex and allowed for numerous styles of listening. Overall, however, there was a gradual but discernible shift away from often highly participatory modes of listening toward more restrained and disciplined forms. For the most part, audiences retained a considerable measure of control over this process, with concerted attempts to reform behaviours from outside sometimes resisted and often unsuccessful. Above all, popular audiences seemed to have shown a mature, almost instinctive understanding of what constituted the correct response to different musical environments underpinned in most instances by a propensity to politeness and open-mindedness.

This analysis is provisional, a target upon which others may sharpen their thoughts. Far more research is required and our growing, detailed understanding of particular musical genres will refine, reshape and perhaps overturn the picture drawn here. The materials on which to base new work are not always plentiful and those working on the nineteenth and earlier twentieth centuries in particular will require much resourceful reading between the lines. For more recent times, oral history, preferably undertaken collaboratively, represents a massive opportunity which must not be lost. In particular, such work might also help meet the still unanswered challenge set by James Obelkevich in his pioneering essay on the history of listening, which called for the study not of individual listening environments but of the total listening experiences of specific social groups so as ‘to make sense of peoples’ musical taste by seeing it as part of their way of life and social situation’.

[footnote] [51] James Obelkevich, ‘In search of the listener’, *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 114, 1 (1989), p. 104. [/footnote]

The history of the ways in which live popular music has been listened to in Britain is still in its exciting infancy.

Select bibliography

Bailey, Peter (ed.). *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986.

Hoggart, Richard. *The Uses of Literacy*. Originally published, 1957, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1973 ed.

Jackson, Brian. *Working-Class Community*. Originally published 1968, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972 ed.

Johnson, James H. *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History*. Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1995.

Kift, Dagmar. *The Victorian Music Hall. Culture, Class and Conflict*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

Obelkevich, James. 'In search of the listener', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 114, 1 (1989), pp. 102–108.

Russell, Dave. *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2/1997.

Please leave a comment or share via social media by clicking on the icons.

View the [online publication details](#)

[footnote] [52] *The Experience of Listening to Music: Methodologies, Identities, Histories* has been Open Access funded by the Arts & Humanities Research Council (AHRC), grant AH/J013986/1, <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019> The collection has been peer reviewed, edited by David Rowland and Helen Barlow, and subsequently prepared for online publication by the Knowledge Media Institute (KMi) of The Open University. Published by: The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes MK7 6AA. Copyright © The Open University. First published: July 2019. ISBN: 9781473028647. PDFs displaying some of the content from the online collection is available from <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019/getting-the-best-from-this-website/> You can experience the online publication as it was originally designed at <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019> View copyright information relating to the publication here: <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019/copyright> <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019/copyright/> [footnote]

