

The Careers of British  
Musicians, 1750–1850  
*A Profession of Artisans*

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*Deborah Rohr*



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## I      The social and professional status of musicians in the eighteenth century

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Like many other eighteenth-century professionals, musicians belonged to the large, socially and economically fluid group that historians term the “middling sort.”<sup>1</sup> The economic pressures and occupational reconfigurations of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries presented them – both individually and collectively – with significant challenges. As a result, their social identities evolved in a variety of possible directions. The historian John Seed has argued convincingly that focusing solely on the “rise of the middle class” during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries neglects the history of the “middle ranks” from which it emerged. It is essential to perceive “the way in which as a social category ‘the middling sort’ were splintering into a number of quite different strata and quite divergent individual fates.”<sup>2</sup> Many members of the middle ranks experienced downward social mobility. Others rose to the level of small employers, although perhaps not entirely partaking of the new cultural definition of “middle-class.” Still others stayed more or less in the same place but with some loss of social status and stability, evolving into what has been termed the “middling class” of the early nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> And some moved into “quite new and distinctive middle-class groups: new professions, white-collar groupings, specialised functionaries within commerce and so on.”<sup>4</sup>

A close study of musicians has revealed the full range of outcomes just described, with important implications for the evolution of the profession. The nature of the struggle of musicians to maintain or raise their social and professional status will be a central theme of this book. This chapter will first consider “profession” as a general category in the eighteenth century and the musical profession in particular,<sup>5</sup> including the minimal but growing presence of women in the profession. It will then examine two of the major obstacles facing the musical profession’s autonomy and status: foreign competition, and a variety of negative cultural perceptions about music and musicians.

### Professional status

“Profession” was not a new concept or occupational category in the eighteenth century. While the rise of the professions has often been linked with the development of a middle class in the early nineteenth century, the professions in England had had a long history.<sup>6</sup> The three traditional professions were divinity, medicine, and law, although other occupations increasingly shared their social status and professional ideals. Music had at one time enjoyed some of the trappings of an elite profession, and in the eighteenth century still retained vestiges of its former status.

The traditional professions were characterized primarily by their suitability as careers for gentlemen: they involved no manual labor, were based on a liberal (classical) education, and were protected by church, state, and university from undue competition. There were two educational routes to membership in a profession. The historian W. J. Reader describes the elite route: “the essential qualification for entry into any of these three occupations, which were sometimes called the ‘learned’ professions, was a liberal education: that is, the education of a gentleman, not of a trader or an artisan.”<sup>7</sup> It was assumed that individuals with a sound classical education and general erudition would be entirely capable of learning whatever else they needed to know through independent study. At the same time, part of the claim to independent and exclusive professional status depended on access to specialized knowledge: “it was the type of learning which professionals possessed, rather than social status or institutional forms of organisation, which set them apart from other groups.”<sup>8</sup> The status of the old elite professions was guaranteed by their presumed theoretical bases, classical educations, and links with church, state, and university.

Alongside the old elite professions, there were lower branches – especially in law and medicine. Sometimes viewed as specifically eighteenth-century upstarts, the professional status of attorneys (later called solicitors), surgeons, and apothecaries in fact began much earlier. They were distinguished from the elite branches of the professions by the social origins of their members, who generally emerged from a lower, artisanal, social stratum of the “middling sort,” and by their educations, which were largely practical and obtained through apprenticeship. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, such groups organized and attempted to gain increased legitimacy as professions. At the same time, newer aspiring professions (veterinary surgeons, civil engineers, architects, surveyors), which did not have high-status counterparts, were also organizing to achieve middle-class professional status and independence. The attempts by these occupations to assert their own professional importance posed a threat to the traditional professions. W. J. Reader points out the tendency

of the higher-status branches, especially in medicine, to try to obstruct the process of professionalization in the lower ranks: “The physicians were fighting a determined defensive action, not at all to their own credit or ultimate advantage.”<sup>9</sup>

How did the lower branches of both the old professions and the new, aspiring ones achieve their goals? The main strategy was to assert control over entrance, training, and certification. For example, the Apothecaries Act of 1815 granted the London Society of Apothecaries the legal right to forbid anyone to use the title “apothecary” who had not fulfilled the minimum qualifications set by the Society. The new professions thus established minimum educational standards, formed qualifying associations that gave examinations and granted licenses, and established professional training institutions that replaced the traditional apprenticeship route.<sup>10</sup> In this way, aspiring professions formulated a theoretical basis for their work that put them on a level with the established professions, and protected their credibility, while also asserting the importance of more practical kinds of expertise to justify their ability to complement or compete with the traditional professions.

Professional status was inextricably linked with social status, and the professionalizing impetus was largely about raising or preserving a particular social position. As a result of the redrawing of social categories, members of the middle ranks experienced heightened pressure to achieve and to consolidate their middle-class status, both as an end in itself and to safeguard access to a middle-class clientele. M. S. Larson has argued convincingly that the “market control” achieved by professional self-regulation was closely harnessed to the goal of collective social mobility.<sup>11</sup> The Society of Gentlemen Practitioners (attorneys), founded in the first half of the eighteenth century, was concerned primarily with raising the notoriously low public image of attorneys. Wilfrid Prest identifies this organization as “a precursor of the Victorian ‘qualifying associations’ which eventually came to control most professional and would-be professional occupations.”<sup>12</sup> It tried to exclude members whose low social origins and/or unscrupulous business practices contributed to the popular prejudices against attorneys.<sup>13</sup> Such measures also gave the professions power to assure conformity with the emerging middle-class standards of decorum and respectability. Another example was the founding of the Royal Academy in 1768. Jeremy Black explains that it was founded to elevate the fine arts, and that “engravers were excluded from the ranks of the Academy for many years because they were regarded as artisanal.”<sup>14</sup>

It is particularly important to note the character of the social aspirations shared by both traditional and aspiring professions. According to Harold Perkin, the ideals of the professional middle class were at first closely

related to those of entrepreneurs, but diverged increasingly into a discrete ideal by the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>15</sup> The professional ideal, obsessed with social status, eager to dissociate itself from trade, and focused on formal education and high standards of moral conduct, in some ways aimed even higher than a middle-class ideal. As Reader expresses it, "Their idea of social standing was to get as close as they could to the pattern set by the landed gentry, or what they imagined the pattern to be";<sup>16</sup> "the new professional man brought one scale of values – the gentleman's – to bear upon the other – the tradesman's."<sup>17</sup> The uneasy combination of such ideals is particularly characteristic of musicians, whose careers often combined both relatively low social and economic conditions with direct dealings with wealthy patrons.

Unlike emerging professions such as apothecaries, architects, engineers, and the artistic professions of painting or acting, music could claim a long history of association with the requisite characteristics of a traditional profession: a high-status career track securely linked to church and universities; a foundation of theoretical knowledge; recognition as a liberal art by the universities (which had been granting degrees in music since 1463); and essential social value due to its role in the cathedral services of the Anglican Church. The formal education of musicians, which included classical languages, had been provided for in the centuries-old royal endowments attached to the cathedrals.

Music also had a lower-status, artisanal branch made up primarily of secular musicians such as stage singers and orchestral instrumentalists. These musicians benefited as the increasingly prosperous middle classes eagerly adopted the practices of a cultured elite – attending concerts, purchasing instruments and sheet music, and taking private lessons.<sup>18</sup> As one periodical reported in 1821, "There are . . . the strongest proofs that it [music] is becoming the ornament and the solace of other classes beside the most affluent . . . The proofs to which we allude are, the increasing manufacture of instruments, the vast augmentation of musical publications, and the number of professors and instructors."<sup>19</sup>

It would seem that musicians were in a good position to enjoy both the advantages of traditional professional status and the growth in demand for secular musicians. However, even in the mid-eighteenth century the high-status branch of the musical profession no longer commanded its former prestige, the financial and social advantages of careers in church music and of university degrees in music had declined considerably, and the old profession with its church and university ties became much less significant in the profession as a whole. No successful attempt to reverse this trend occurred until at least the middle of the nineteenth century. This decline weakened the theoretical, intellectual component of the profession, and



with it music's identity as one of the liberal arts. Since the intellectual component, recognition by the universities, and an essential role in the church were the primary legitimizing characteristics for the musical profession, the decline in church music careers in the eighteenth century struck at the foundation of musicians' traditional claims for professional status.

By the late eighteenth century, music was no longer viewed primarily as a liberal art or a liberal profession, but rather as an artisanal craft with links to the theatres and pleasure gardens, financial insecurity, and poor long-term economic or social prospects. Partly as a result of the growing demand, the urban, secular branch had in the eighteenth century already started to become the most significant branch of the profession, both musically and economically. This occupational classification is accurately reflected in Patrick Colquhoun's tables of national income distribution for 1806.<sup>20</sup> In the more detailed of his two tables, he defined the liberal arts and sciences as medicine, literature, and the fine arts. In the more general table the term "liberal professions" includes the same items as well as law. Musicians, however, whose estimated incomes were somewhat lower than those in the professional category, were labeled as "Persons employed in theatrical pursuits, and attached to theatres and concerts, as musicians, etc."

In order to withstand the loss of prestige of its higher branch, as well as the social and economic pressures building toward the end of the century, musicians needed to organize in some way. As Reader explains, "An occupation's rise to professional standing can be pretty accurately charted by reference to the progress of its professional institute or association."<sup>21</sup> At first such associations were usually informal, without recognition outside the profession; the more important next step was incorporation, usually by means of a royal charter, "which may be said to confer official recognition by the State that the occupation has achieved professional standing."<sup>22</sup>

The musical profession included a number of organizations, and individual musicians proposed others, but only one – the Royal Society of Musicians, founded in 1738 – had any of the characteristics of a professional association.<sup>23</sup> Application for membership in the Society usually required a statement of the nature and extent of the musicians' training, employment, and income, and this information was verified by the signatures of other musicians. A royal charter was granted in 1790.<sup>24</sup> However, the RSM had none of the powers normally granted by royal charter such as control over examinations and licensing, or the authority to take legal action against unqualified practitioners. Although composed of the leading London musicians, it had been founded to provide charitable assistance to its members, and this remained its primary function. The RSM's

royal recognition and incorporation could conceivably have formed the basis for more characteristic professional innovations, but the Society remained committed to charity, and this, with its unfortunate implications for the economic prospects of musical careers, did little to further the professional status of musicians.

Without the institutions essential for professional autonomy, advancement in musical careers depended on an uneven mix of merit and patronage. In many cases, however, musical merit was still determined by patrons rather than professionals, and was defined solely as expertise without consideration of such social criteria as education, manners, and respectability. As a result, musicians of low social origins, narrow educational backgrounds, and limited social skills might advance in their careers. (Similar challenges to professional control characterized the other performance occupations, as well as that of writing.<sup>25</sup>) Little, therefore, could be accomplished to raise the social and professional status of the musical profession as a whole.

The status and organizational issues facing the musical profession were largely debated with male musicians in mind. Even though growing numbers of women pursued music as an amateur accomplishment in the second half of the eighteenth century, most branches of the profession were closed to them. Furthermore, the traditional association of music with immorality (see below) could take on even more virulent forms once women crossed unambiguously into the public sphere. In this context, it is not surprising that relatively few women succeeded in pursuing music as a profession. In the eighteenth century, the notable exceptions were the female singers in the Italian Opera, English theatres, pleasure gardens, and oratorio performances. A few women also held employment as church organists, especially in the last decade of the century, and there were a few who became harpists and even composers.

The singers, however, were by far the most public and well-known female professionals. Those who sang in theatres suffered the same personal and, in the case of the Italian singers, xenophobic attacks as their male colleagues. For most of the century actresses were assumed to be sexually disreputable and of the lowest moral level,<sup>26</sup> and similar assumptions were often applied to female theatre singers. Even the most renowned, such as the opera singer Mrs. Billington, were vulnerable to scurrilous attacks on their conduct and morals.

Consistent with the heightened early nineteenth-century emphasis on respectability in general, the potential loss of reputation was an even more compelling reason for discouraging women from professional activity. One music periodical in 1820 described "those to whom it would be almost annihilation to witness the performance of a daughter, a sister, or a

mistress [wife] in public.’’<sup>27</sup> There were also numerous cautionary tales about the fates of young women whose families were unable to prevent them from pursuing careers as singers in the theatres, with disastrous results. And of course there was a general ambivalence about women being in the professions at all. The editor of the *Musical World*, showing more diplomacy than logic, commented, ‘‘We hold music to be altogether too *laborious* a profession for women ... it is, however, much followed by them, and finds among the sex some of its most distinguished ornaments.’’<sup>28</sup>

Although the ideology of separate spheres asserted that women’s place was in the home, where they could nurture the moral and civic development of society, evidence suggests that new intensity was lent to this ideology in response to the growing visibility and activity of women outside the home.<sup>29</sup> In any case, by the early nineteenth century there were several loopholes for women who aspired both to musical careers and to the middle-class status valued by their male colleagues. Since music was a completely acceptable amateur accomplishment for women, it was considered understandable and even laudable if a woman who found herself in difficult economic circumstances supported herself by teaching or even by performing music (see chapter 4). Furthermore, the female English singer – one who fulfilled the requisite ideals both of femininity and cultural nationalism – could offer an important alternative to the much more threatening voices and deportment of the Italian opera singers. (The complex interaction of gender, nationalist, and vocal ideals will be discussed in chapter 6.)

In the nineteenth century, several developments opened more doors for women as professional musicians. One of these was the founding in 1822 of the Royal Academy of Music; another was the evolution of concert life, offering performance venues where women could sidestep both the primarily male tradition of the church and the social stigma of the stage. In addition to singers, women were often pianists – performers as well as teachers – and a number became composers. All, however, had to navigate cultural prejudices about music and musicians, restrictions on women’s musical education, prejudices about women appearing in public, and some resistance among their male colleagues in the profession.

### Foreign competition

From early in the eighteenth century, foreign musicians traveled to England to take advantage of the opportunities there.<sup>30</sup> Since entry to the profession was determined solely by free competition and musicians could travel to London and move directly into remunerative and prestigious musical employment without any regulation, they presented serious com-

petition to native musicians, and also weakened the potential for native musicians to achieve the market control that was essential to professional status.

At least as early as 1720, with the founding of the Italian Opera in London, English musicians and observers of the music scene frowned upon the number of foreign musicians employed in England and the extremely high fees they commanded. Many of these musicians were connected with the Opera as singers, orchestral instrumentalists, composers, and librettists; other sources of income included music copying, accompanying, teaching, and even managing singers' careers.<sup>31</sup> In 1728, Daniel Defoe observed that London was oversupplied with "heaps of Foreign Musicians"<sup>32</sup> who were attracted to London because of the higher wages available there. The foreign presence continued throughout the century. G. F. A. Wendeborn, a German pastor residing in London, remarked in 1791 that "Many foreign singers, fiddlers, and dancers, are extravagantly paid; and, if they are the least frugal, they are enabled to retire to their own country where they may live in affluence, enriched by English money."<sup>33</sup> Another observed that these musicians often had little incentive to return to their native countries: "The greatest part of the foreign musicians who visit London remain there: for as that great city is actually a PERU to them, they do not choose to deprive themselves of the lucrative monopoly which they there enjoy, in regard to their own profession."<sup>34</sup>

Through the second half of the century, Italians continued to dominate at the Opera; German musicians held a distinct advantage at court, and were also among the leaders of London's concert life. From the 1790s, however, with the military and social upheavals and reduced opportunities in much of Europe, Italians and Germans in English musical life were joined by musicians from France and other European countries. The tone of competition became more focused, with the most acute resentments still reserved for the Italians, whose cliques were thought to exert undue influence on musical life. In 1811 the *Dramatic Censor* applauded one singer for choosing a Mozart opera for her benefit concert, explaining that "such a choice affords a decided proof of her good taste, and of her contempt for that bitter jealousy and vicious prejudice against the German composers, which has so long actuated the Italian musicians, and so long been successful in withholding from the public the noble performances of Bach, Mozart, and Winter."<sup>35</sup>

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the social and economic pressures on musicians intensified. Competition, especially for private patronage, was at its height. In this atmosphere, the resentment of British musicians was deepened further by the apparent advantages some foreign musicians enjoyed in obtaining aristocratic patronage. Each year during the 1820s, the musical press reported unprecedented gains by foreign

musicians. In 1821, one musician wrote of the “influence foreign music is gradually gaining in this country, and which threatens the almost total oblivion and expulsion of English composition.”<sup>36</sup> An account of the 1822 London season reported that

the capital circumstance that has lately marked the study and practise of music in England is, unquestionably, the increasing notice and estimation which foreign compositions, foreign execution, and foreign professors, have attracted . . . The influx of foreign musicians – the substitution of Italian songs, duets, and concerted pieces for the compositions of our own countrymen . . . afford abundant demonstration.<sup>37</sup>

The composer G. H. B. Rodwell, writing in 1833, claimed that 1824 had been the year when “the flood-gates of foreign music were thrown open.”<sup>38</sup> The distinguishing feature of each ensuing year seems to have been the same, however, together with the recognition of increasing competition from German musicians:

The phenomena . . . of the season were then – the immense influx of foreign performers, and the almost entire diversion of the patronage of the leaders of fashion and the public from the English to the foreign style and to foreign artists . . . A double source is now opening upon us – Germany as well as Italy. It has been pronounced by one very competently informed, both by experience and by knowledge, that in fifteen years the German will bear away the palm.<sup>39</sup>

Why were foreign musicians perceived as such a threat? Patrons often seem to have preferred hiring foreign musicians, especially for private concerts (see chapter 3); foreign musicians were sometimes more highly trained and skilled than their British counterparts. Proposals to reform the system of musical training, as well as to provide some mechanism for certification, almost always gave as a rationale the need to offer more effective competition against foreign musicians (see chapter 4).

Objections to the foreign presence also expressed larger, pervasive cultural attitudes. Xenophobia had a long tradition in England, and one which was closely intertwined with the development of a national identity in the eighteenth century. A growing cultural nationalism fueled native developments in many of the arts, especially theatre and the visual arts. In music the cult of Handel and the development of an English vernacular opera illustrate the trend.<sup>40</sup> As will be discussed below, the perceived foreign intrusions were viewed increasingly in terms of xenophobic anxieties about class, morality, and especially gender identity and roles. Cultural anxieties of this sort continued to compound the real social and economic obstacles faced by musicians.

### Cultural perceptions

Musicians labored under a number of negative attitudes, some of which derived from the real structural problems in the competition for social and professional status: economic hardships, social and educational limitations, membership in an unstable social stratum during a period of sweeping change, and competition from foreign musicians. For example, it was frequently assumed that musicians came from relatively low social origins, that they were poorly educated, socially unskilled and inferior individuals. Other negative perceptions were due to prejudices and fears about music and musicians, whose activities inadvertently tapped deep cultural anxieties.<sup>41</sup> These included notions that music was frivolous and had no essential social value; that music and musicians were associated with immorality; and that music – especially in its connections with the world of the theatre – posed a threat to Britishness, to existing power relationships, and to accepted definitions of gender. Such beliefs significantly undermined musicians' chances for achieving middle-class social and professional status and respectability.

A number of mid-eighteenth-century musicians wrote about the problems of social status and of widespread contempt for professional musicians. The image of the musician as “mere fiddler” was a recurrent theme. William Hayes, a well-established church musician and theorist, complained in 1753 that

Not only in *Italy* but in most Countries abroad, a thoroughly accomplished Musician is at least upon the Footing of a Scholar in any other Science; and is treated with equal Respect: whereas in *England* we are often too apt to despise the Professors of Music, and to treat them indiscriminately with Contempt: But although every Fidler may have the Vanity to look upon himself as a Musician, yet we ought not to regard every Musician, only as a Fidler.<sup>42</sup>

Another contemporary musician, John Potter, who composed songs for Vauxhall Gardens, wrote a book about the state of the musical profession in 1762. Like Hayes, he addressed the widespread contempt for musicians: “The elegant art of music, when consider'd as an occupation, is by some thought to have little dignity.”<sup>43</sup> He suggests several reasons for this attitude:

The contempt thrown on music, arises from two objections: The one, representing it as not being in general so profitable and reputable as many other professions, as having for its object nothing better than pleasure and entertainment. The other, that it not only requires a particular genius to excel in it, but also a great deal of time to make any progress, and by this means hinders and disqualifies a person for anything else.<sup>44</sup>

In other words, music as a profession lacked essential social value, and left so little time for broader education that it risked producing nothing but “mere fiddlers.”

Such objections carried little weight with Potter, who believed anyone who achieved a high level of skill should be respected for that alone: “Great excellency in any profession, is sufficient to recommend and entitle us to honour and reputation.”<sup>45</sup> Although he did not rank music “before the sciences of divinity, physick, law, or the study of languages,” he thought that “it certainly must be allow’d to be next in dignity.”<sup>46</sup> Furthermore, he reminded the reader of the role of music in the church: “the great use of church music in the worship of our Creator, is . . . a circumstance of greater weight and value than those two ascrib’d to music, of pleasure and entertainment.”<sup>47</sup> Potter further argues that if an individual loved music enough to spend many years of study in exchange for meagre financial rewards, why should anyone complain?

[I]f [musicians] can be pleased with a moderate fortune, that they may be more at leisure to study and improve the science of music, for the benefit of the rising generation; they may hope for a pardon from those, who are engag’d in the plunder of the world; as leaving them the more room, and easing them of rivals, who by their performances shew, they did not want either capacity, or application (if they had thought fit) to shine in courts, or camps, in the pulpit, or at the bar. If therefore men conspicuous for their love and close attachment to music, have preferr’d the desire of an innocent fame from their works, to the love of wealth and grandeur; let this singularity of theirs, be at least excus’d since it is [to] themselves most delightful, advantageous to many, and hurtful to none.<sup>48</sup>

However, disdain for the person whose artistic aspirations outweighed financial motives continued to be cited as a reason for the low status of musicians. G. F. A. Wendeborn wrote in 1791:

No wonder . . . if the greatest part of the English, whose *summum bonum* is money, are tasteless in the arts, and treat them with neglect, or even look upon them with a kind of disdain; no wonder if a tradesman or merchant, favoured by liberty, regards the accumulation of money above all, and considers a man of talents and learning, or an artist endowed with excellent genius, as beings far below him.<sup>49</sup>

Potter and Hayes viewed themselves as the equals of other professionals, and enjoyed a higher sense of self-esteem and social status than existed for many later musicians. That even these distinguished professionals found themselves on the defensive illustrates the degree to which the high-status career track had declined.

By the early nineteenth century, musicians were becoming even more defensive about their social value, morality, and respectability. The image of musicians as poor artisans degraded by association with other musicians

and theatre employees, late working hours, and low earnings, continued to oppress professional musicians in their quest for higher status. One musician wrote a long article in 1818, "Letter on the Character of Musicians," in which he attempted to point out the strengths of musicians' attainments and morality. He emphasized the degree to which a decline in respectability was merely a product of poverty, and did not necessarily represent basic flaws of character or family background: "The early character of the musician is liable to be tinged by opposites; by an overweening opinion of his own accomplishments and by vulgar and dissolute habits acquired during the season of obscurity."<sup>50</sup> He went on to explain how this hurt the musicians' relationships with patrons, and he reiterated the common theme of the musician as "mere fiddler" whose intensive musical studies rendered him inadequate for social contact with his employers:

The labour of practice can scarcely ever be relieved, except by some coarse or dissolute species of dissipation. The poor musicians can find no better associates than those of his own condition, and while his sensibility is sharpened by his art, his taste occasionally awakened, and his manners improved by the good company into which that art casually introduces him, it is most probable he is only made to feel the more acutely those deficiencies which he has not the means to repair. The polite and the informed who are induced to enter into conversation with him discover at once that his recommendations are confined to his fiddle or his voice, and they quit him in that hopeless conviction.<sup>51</sup>

The same author went on to note that there were, in fact, many exceptions who suffered for the failings of a few, since "there exists a great confusion relative to the several orders of musicians."<sup>52</sup> He described the exceptional cases as "men educated under the intelligent care of parents or friends, whose previous success in the profession or in life, has enabled them to find the easier path to greatness." However, he argued that the exceptions "give a contrast but not a contradiction to our more universal description. Were they perhaps to trace back even a single generation, they would arrive at the original of our portraiture."<sup>53</sup> Throughout the 1820s, in the context of an evolving ethos of middle-class respectability, contributors to musical journals addressed the contempt and disdain for musicians that resulted from perceptions of musicians' social uselessness, narrow education, unrefined manners, and immorality.

The complex network of prejudices about music and musicians added layers of cultural meanings and associations to the more obvious economic and occupational challenges faced by musicians. These attitudes included the long history of suspicion towards music, specifically the notion that it was fundamentally a feminine art; xenophobia, with its corollary anxieties about cultural intrusion and effeminacy; and the reorientation of cultural beliefs about gender and sexuality, accompanied by an ongoing discourse



about the new ideals of masculinity and femininity.<sup>54</sup> While a full discussion of these changes lies outside the scope of the present study, several aspects are pertinent to our understanding of music and the musical profession in eighteenth-century British culture.

Well before the eighteenth century, music was associated with the feminine. As Linda Austern has convincingly demonstrated, music and women in early modern England were thought to share many characteristics, most of them negative, or at least potentially dangerous. “Feminine nature” was defined “as especially disordered, convoluted, deceptive, changeable and uncontrolled, a literal inversion of the positive, direct qualities associated with the era’s masculine ideals.”<sup>55</sup> And it was believed that “all sounding music . . . potentially invites the physical senses of the listener to useless, base, sensory pleasure and therefore reduces the mind to a simpler, more passive and ultimately more feminine state”; in other words, music was “an emasculator and destroyer of manly virtue.”<sup>56</sup> Although it was argued by some that military marches could have appropriate effects for men, love songs and other sweet sounds would have “a feminizing effect.”<sup>57</sup> These categories were even applied to the craft and rhetoric of music, with chromaticism, ornamentation, and the falsetto voice being considered to have feminine attributes.<sup>58</sup> The underlying assumption that music was feminine, and even feminizing to men, appears in various guises throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, with important implications for music as a profession.<sup>59</sup>

During the eighteenth century the evolution of new gender roles and beliefs found expression in misogyny, homophobia, xenophobia, and more restrictive definitions of masculinity and femininity. An obvious focal point for such anxieties about otherness was provided early in the century by the full-scale importation of music and musicians for the Italian Opera. Thomas McGeary has identified the intricate and pervasive cultural, national, and gender anxieties that were stirred by the Opera, including the persistent notion that the enterprise was intrinsically feminine.<sup>60</sup> The castrato singers presented especially complex gender ambiguities. English fears of opera in general, and the castrati in particular, included the possible feminizing effect on listeners; beliefs that homosexuality had been imported from Italy along with the Opera and that the practice would spread;<sup>61</sup> and fears of the attractiveness of castrati to women. The high fees paid to the singers were described by one critic as the Italians “cuckolding” the nation.<sup>62</sup> In sum, the effeminate Opera threatened the masculine basis of British culture, and “questioned and threatened the stability of those gender distinctions essential to maintaining stable social institutions.”<sup>63</sup> In fact, such fears encompassed an entire complex of class, gender, national identity, religious, and cultural associations. An aristocracy spending large

sums of English money to import homosexuality, castrati, Catholicism, and music into London threatened masculine, Protestant “British sense, reason, wit, and virtue.”<sup>64</sup>

Ideals of masculinity and femininity – frequently linked with and used as metaphors for developments in commerce, politics, and art – were discussed and debated throughout the eighteenth century. Effeminacy was perceived as a perennial threat and was thought to result from many causes: increased wealth and “luxury,” consumerism, foreign influences, overly refined manners and sensibility, and the cultivation of arts, especially music.<sup>65</sup> Unchecked effeminacy, it was feared, could lead to the dismantling of society, defeat by foreign invaders, or even national decline analogous to that of the Roman Empire. As Richard Leppert argues, “The appetite for music was great; the fear of satisfying that appetite was still greater.”<sup>66</sup> “Music’s impact on the body was characterized as a moral question, which in truth operated as a smoke screen for anxieties about identities grounded in nation, class, and gender.”<sup>67</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, music and musicians were powerful symbols in the ongoing renegotiation of gender, national and social identities, and roles.

The view of music as a feminine art was further reinforced by the cultivation of music as an amateur accomplishment for women. The growing wealth of the middle ranks and the avid consumption of musical instruments, printed music, and private music lessons fueled the trend.<sup>68</sup> Music as an amateur pursuit for men, however, was viewed quite differently.<sup>69</sup> The widely quoted Lord Chesterfield argued “that performance upon an instrument is derogatory to character, both as becomes a man and a gentleman.”<sup>70</sup> Such attitudes persisted throughout the period under study. In 1820 an article entitled “Music as a Pursuit for Men” tried to refute such prejudices.<sup>71</sup> The author credited this attitude partly to the influence of Chesterfield, and partly to “the not absolutely unfounded opinion that the cultivation of music leads to dissolute habits *and association with dissolute companions*.”<sup>72</sup> Once again, the moral question thinly veiled the underlying concern that “the musical gentleman . . . potentially threatened . . . the definition of gender upon which both the society and the culture ultimately depended.”<sup>73</sup>

Despite the virtual disappearance of the abhorred castrati from England late in the eighteenth century, cultural anxieties about music, and especially opera, only intensified in the 1790s. The primary reason was the French Revolution and subsequent wars, which further fueled both xenophobia and misogyny. In addition to the political and military threat, the upheavals on the Continent resulted in even larger numbers of foreign musicians competing for employment in London. And, as Barker-Benfield has shown, from the onset of war in 1793 there was also a swift reaction

against sensibility, women writers, and any challenge to the “natural ordering of the sexes.”<sup>74</sup> Political and social pressures encouraged the evolution of strict definitions of gender roles and the further development of an ideology of separate spheres – respectively public and domestic – for men and women.<sup>75</sup> As Linda Colley describes,

There was a sense at this time . . . in which the British conceived of themselves as an essentially “masculine” culture – bluff, forthright, rational, down-to-earth to the extent of being philistine – caught up in an eternal rivalry with an essentially “effeminate” France – subtle, intellectually devious, preoccupied with high fashion, fine cuisine and etiquette, and so obsessed with sex that boudoir politics were bound to direct it.<sup>76</sup>

In combating these challenges, early nineteenth-century musicians attempted to prove that they were respectable members of society by echoing middle-class fears of music-related dissipation. Cyril Ehrlich aptly describes this phase in the history of the music profession as “the transition period from rakishness to sobriety.”<sup>77</sup> It is possible that no group expressed a more delicate sense of propriety and morality in these years than the defensive professional musicians. For example, in the following passage the author distinguished between the love and appreciation of music, and the music-making that occurred in all-male tavern singing-clubs:

Music, as it is understood by persons who thus associate its pleasures with a love of the joys of the table, is neither more nor less than the faculty of singing a Bacchanalian song, or trolling a merry catch, or joining in a boisterous glee . . . It must soon be seen that the species of vanity which is pampered and fed by the praises of tavern-friends half mad, half maudlin, is a low, depraved, and contemptible passion: and I contend, that the mind which is once capable of turning itself towards the contemplation of music, and aiming at the acquisition of any tolerable share of practical skill, will nauseate and reject such applauses as garbage fit only for the most vulgar animal appetites.<sup>78</sup>

This kind of moralistic writing is characteristic of the early nineteenth-century besieged professional musician, and is very different from the defensive but still professionally minded commentary of the mid-eighteenth-century musician, John Potter. Music, not morals, was Potter’s main concern. Early nineteenth-century musicians could no longer enjoy the luxury of primarily musical priorities.

Music’s identification as a feminine form of expression, one linked with women and with male effeminacy, automatically put male practitioners of the art on the defensive about their masculinity, their morality and respectability, and even their Britishness. In fact, the evolution during these years of a specific definition of British masculinity – one characterized by sobriety, simplicity, and virtue – can be viewed as part of the larger struggle for middle-class political power and legitimacy.<sup>79</sup> The link between gender definitions and class identity was pervasive. As Catherine Hall explains,

Definitions of masculinity and femininity played an important part in marking out the middle class, separating it off from other classes and creating strong links between disparate groups within that class – Nonconformists and Anglicans, Radicals and conservatives, the richer bourgeoisie and the petite bourgeoisie. The separation between the sexes was marked out at every level within the society – in manufacturing, the retail trades and the professions, in public life of all kinds, in the churches, in the press and in the home.<sup>80</sup>

In sum, achieving and consolidating middle-class professional status required conformity with a wide range of cultural beliefs about Englishness, gender, morality. Professional musicians, with their varied social and educational backgrounds, and their pursuit of an activity tainted with femininity and foreignness, faced an uphill battle. As one mid-eighteenth-century writer explained, he would “think it more respectable to bring up my son a Blacksmith . . . than find him Apprentice to the best Master of Music in England . . . I love my country so well, that I hate everything that administers to Luxury and Effeminacy.”<sup>81</sup> To be identified with the “other,” especially in a time of sweeping social and cultural change, was not a strong platform from which to launch a bid for professional autonomy or middle-class respectability.