Introduction: the ringing island

The ubiquity of music

'England is celebrated abroad as the ringing island', wrote Edward Leigh in 1656. Thomas Fuller agreed that foreign visitors were in the habit of applying the description to England because of its abundance of church bells. Both writers knew in their hearts that this abundance signalled God's favour and thus they accepted the label with grace. The English had pleased their maker by receiving and proclaiming the gospel, a project to which the metallic music of the bells had contributed in no small measure. Fuller went on, 'we have (God increase their number) many and melodious bels, tuneable amongst themselves, and loud-sounding the Word of God to others'. In his ears, this was a fundamentally religious sound, but visitors also noted the development and popularity of recreational ringing. Drunken Englishmen, it was reported, sometimes took to the church tower in order to demonstrate the vigour with which they could pull the ropes and clang the bells. Godly or worldly, the loud-sounding church bells of the ringing island caught the attention of continental tourists two centuries before their descendants came to know England by a rather different term, 'the land without music'.[1]

Early modern England also rang with music of many other sorts. Indeed, the sheer vibrancy of its musical culture will be the first major theme of this book. The term 'ringing' was applied not only to bells but also to singing, trumpet blasts and the calls of birds (it also described any sound that seemed to linger in the ears). These varieties of music took their place among many others, and with only a little licence we can imagine the ringing island as home to them all. When Ned Ward walked the streets of London in the very last years of the seventeenth century, he was profoundly dubious about the musical tastes of the people but he did not doubt their appetite. The satirist heard and hated the piercing outdoor

[1] Edward Leigh, *A Treatise of Religion* (London, 1656), epistle to the reader; Thomas Fuller, *Joseph's Partie-colored Coat* (London, 1640), p. 66; Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England 1840–1914* (1987; Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), p. 1. For further discussion of bell-ringing, see below, ch. 9 (also CD tracks 47 and 48).

music of the city waits. He scorned the 'melancholy multitude' that gathered to hear a blind ballad-singer perform a song by ear. She sang her words to a sober psalm tune and 'put the people a-trembling' with her account of the pains of hell. In Bartholomew Fair, Ward encountered a particularly vile concentration of untutored music-makers. He heard the rumbling of drums and 'the intolerable squeakings of catcalls and penny trumpets'. In one booth, 'a parcel of country scrapers were sawing a tune'. At the north-west side of the fair, 'music-houses stood as thick one by another as bawdy-houses in Chick-lane'. The boom of kettledrums and the blare of trumpets signalled the commencement of appalling dance-shows. A consort of fiddlers set Ward's own teeth dancing unsympathetically in his head, and the singing of another ballad provoked him to declare that he would rather hear 'an old barber ring "Whittington's Bells" on his cittern' (many musical compositions imitated the sound of bells in this period). The 'disproportioned notes and imperfect cadences' of a group of hautboy-players 'boxed our ears into a deafness'. To his regret, Ward recovered sufficiently to hear the bawdy songs of a female fiddler whose 'hiccuping voice' and 'intolerable scrapes on her cracked instrument' were almost enough to put him off both music and women forever.[2]

As this scornful survey indicates, musical instruments existed in considerable variety. Labels were often somewhat vague and there was little standardisation in design, but a count of several thousand contemporary references suggests that the most commonly encountered instruments were drums, trumpets, fiddles and bagpipes. Between them, these four instruments and their close relations account for just over half of the references. There were, however, many other instruments too, each contributing its distinctive sound to the music of the ringing island. Some were plucked or strummed: lutes, harps, citterns, bandoras, orpharions, gitterns and guitars. Many were blown: flutes and fifes, pipes (often played with the percussive tabor by a single performer), horns, cornetts (curved wooden instruments), whistles, sackbuts (early trombones), shawms (precursors of the oboe), flageolets and recorders. Then there were the keyboard instruments: virginals, organs, regals and the occasional clavichord. Many of these music-making devices were lovingly depicted by the artist who decorated the Cavendish family's 'Heaven Room' at Bolsover Castle (Derbyshire) in 1619 (see Figures 0.1 and 0.2). In addition, there were peculiarities such as the trumpet marine, an enormous instrument on

[2] Edward Ward, *The London Spy: Ned Ward's Classic Account of Underworld Life in Eighteenth-century London*, ed. Paul Hyland (East Lansing: Colleagues, 1993), pp. 22, 180, 194, 195, 199.

Figure 0.1. Cherubic musicians adorn the painted ceiling of the Heaven Room (1619) at Bolsover Castle, where they accompany Christ as he ascends into the firmament. This one plays the cornett, a curved wooden instrument with a mouthpiece and a beautiful voice-like tone. Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire, English Heritage, Heaven Room painting, detail.

which a single gut string was delicately touched with the fingers of one hand while those of the other drew the bow or plucked the string in order to sound the resultant harmonics. Trumpet marines were a novelty and rarely heard. The jew's harp or trump, in contrast, was so common that its existence, paradoxically, was very rarely documented. Trumps are difficult to count, but when a thief stole the goods of a Kentish tradeswoman in 1658 his loot included eighteen of them (worth a mere nine pence in total).[3] The metallic twang of the jew's harp, produced by plucking the 'tongue' while the body of the instrument is held between the teeth, may well have been one of England's most familiar musical sounds.

Scholars have sometimes sounded almost as dismissive as Ned Ward in commenting upon the musical capacities of the early modern population.[4]

[3] *Calendar of Assize Records: Kent Indictments, 1649–59*, ed. J. S. Cockburn (London: Her Majesty's Stationery Office, 1989), p. 286. Many of the instruments listed here can be heard on the CD that accompanies this book (a jew's harp sounds on track 35).

[4] See below, pp. 173, 419–20.

Figure 0.2. A violinist, a harper and a sackbut-player each contribute their distinctive sounds to the Bolsover ensemble. For further discussion of this painting, see below, pp. 364–5. Bolsover Castle, Derbyshire, English Heritage, Heaven Room painting, detail.

It is an attitude in need of revision. If we abandon the tendency to conflate musicality and musical literacy (two very different entities) then we must conclude that levels of aptitude and accomplishment in early modern England were impressively high. The entire broadside ballad industry depended partly upon the ability of sellers and consumers to memorise a remarkable number of frequently recycled tunes. Metrical psalmody and change-ringing, likewise, were both founded on the musical memories of ordinary parishioners and upon their willingness to participate. Chapbooks of the period presented a society – admittedly somewhat satirised – in which men and women were likely to break into song at any moment, whether they were at work or at play. The music of the majority was primarily melodic: 'rude people', remarked Dr Wallis in 1698, preferred basic tunes to elaborate consort music because they found it easier to comprehend. Other sources suggest, however, that craftsmen were often capable not only of playing instruments but of singing in parts, adding improvised harmonies to adorn the main melody. Charles Butler lacked the scorn of many educated observers for popular music and noted how groups of artisans sometimes made 'good Harmoni . . ., of 2, 3 or 4 voices: which surely is pleasant enough to the hearers'. According to John Case, human life on all social levels was seasoned with musical

pleasure from cradle to grave, and he voiced a common suspicion of those who claimed not to feel it.[5]

Musical terminology frequently migrated into other categories of expression. To early modern people, the primary associations of terms such as 'harmony', 'concord' and 'discord' were clearly musical, but these potent labels were also applied with great regularity to social and political relations. In most cases, the relations in question were among humans, but when two enormous flocks of starlings confronted one another in a strange aerial battle over the city of Cork in 1621, Londoners soon heard of it and marvelled 'that Birds should thus at discord fall'. Many other expressions did similar service. Admirers of William III promised that he would teach his continental enemies 'a new Jigg to dance'. A plague-ridden city could be described as 'all out of tune' while a woman who died a virgin was, according to one distinctively masculine viewpoint, 'Like a Song without a foot'.[6] To share in the misery of others was to 'bear a part' with them, and the individual who said too much about a personal obsession might need to apologise for having 'strucke too long on this string'. In contrast, the woman who decided wisely to fall silent in order to avoid trouble was said to have 'put up her pipes', while a person who merely prepared the way for somebody else could say deferentially, 'I am but the shawmer to your motion' or 'I am the trumpeter to your show' (in other words, the loud instrument that announces your coming). John Taylor expected his readers to understand when he said of the archetypal prostitute that 'her chiefest instrument is the Sackbut' (associated here with sex because of its sliding mechanism).[7] The language of bell-ringing was fruitful too. Even today, a football manager who dismisses half of his team after a shocking defeat is said to be 'ringing the changes', an expression that first came into use during the early seventeenth century.

[5] *Memoirs of the Royal Society; or A New Abridgement of the Philosophical Transactions . . . [from] 1665 to 1740*, 2nd edn., 10 vols. (London, 1745), vol. III, p. 292; Charles Butler, *The Principles of Musik, in Singing and Setting* (London, 1636), p. 123; John Case, *The Praise of Musicke* (Oxford, 1586; facsimile edn., New York, 1980), pp. 42, 74. There is some controversy over the authorship of this work but I am assuming – as did several contemporaries – that Case was indeed the author. For the counter-case see J. W. Binns, 'John Case and "The Praise of Musicke"', *Music and Letters* 55 (1974), 444–53.

[6] *The Pepys Ballads*, ed. W. G. Day, 5 vols. (Woodbridge: D. S. Brewer, 1987), vol. I, p. 71, vol. II, p. 291; John Taylor, *All the Workes of John Taylor the Water Poet*, 3 vols. (London: Spenser Society, 1869), vol. I, p. 69; *The Delectable History of Poor Robin the Merry Sadler of Walden* (London, *c.* 1680), ch. 18.

[7] *Pepys Ballads*, vol. I, p. 146; Richard Brathwaite, *The English Gentleman* (London, 1630), p. 133; untitled manuscript play, *c.* 1642, D/DW Z5, p. 17, ERO; satirical music lecture given at Oxford, *c.* 1642, Add. MS 37999, fo. 66, BL; Taylor, *All the Workes*, vol. II, p. 258.

Most people could not, however, read music, and the vast majority of what they played and heard was performed from memory rather than from the written page. It was possible for musicians to make their livings and achieve considerable success without musical literacy, and in 1588 Anthony Munday even managed to publish a book of songs with instrumental accompaniment, despite having 'no jote of knowledge in musique'. He apologised to his readers for this shortcoming, adding 'but what I have doone and doo, is onely by the eare'.[8] Despite such evidence, it seems possible that levels of musical literacy were rising more rapidly than we might have assumed. This is not something that permits statistical measurement, but the burgeoning market for instrumental instruction manuals, part-songs, catches and dance tunes clearly suggests that the publisher John Playford, active between the 1650s and 1680s, was not selling his wares only to the gentry and the most sophisticated of professional musicians. Lower down the musical hierarchy, the early modern period evidently witnessed a steady increase in the numbers who could play by book as well as by ear. Two probate documents from Hampshire hint at this development. As early as 1577, a Winchester musician, whose goods were worth only £6 9s 8d in total, bequeathed to his son two violins, three shawms and 'suche bookes as belongs to the said Instruments'. Another poor musician, Thomas Smithe of Basingstoke, died in 1628 with goods worth £13 11s 4d (less £5 1s 6d in debts). Nearly half of his wealth was contained in his twelve musical instruments (viols, bandoras, violins, a cittern and unspecified wind instruments), but he also had twelve pence worth of 'Musick books'.[9] If such lowly practitioners were able to read 'pricksong', then it seems reasonable to assume that the skill was already widely dispersed among those who made their primary livings from music. In all likelihood, such men still performed from memory most of the time, but a slowly increasing proportion of their repertoire may initially have been learned from the printed page.

Musical knowledge and awareness were, for the most part, acquired informally as the consequence of regular exposure to the singing and playing of others. In the lower levels of society, this was how most instrumentalists developed their talents, and one searches the written record in vain for any reference to bagpipe lessons. Scholars have not in general been impressed by the extent of more formal musical education,

[8] Anthony Munday, *A Banquet of Daintie Conceits* (London, 1588), A3v.
[9] Will and inventory of Thomas Saunders *alias* Wheler, 1577 B 70/1–2, and inventory of Thomas Smithe, 1628 AD 98, HRO.

whether practical or theoretical, but there clearly were ways and means by which to develop musical competence.[10] Members of the gentry and aristocracy regularly hired private tutors. Talented boys from less privileged backgrounds sometimes found their way into one of the cathedral or collegiate schools, where music of various sorts was taught as a specialism. At Newark, a song school was founded in 1532 with places for six main choristers and an equal group of potential replacements. The school was therefore small, but it was well equipped and the regime was intensive.[11] Similar institutions survived the Reformation at Chichester, Gloucester, Winchester, Salisbury, Lincoln and many other cathedral cities. Not all of the boys who attended these schools emerged as professional cathedral musicians in adulthood, but those who chose other paths nevertheless carried the knowledge they had acquired out into wider society.[12]

The foundation charters of non-specialist grammar schools did not often mention tuition in music, but these documents may not necessarily be a reliable guide to the actual extent of such tuition. They tell us conclusively that there was music at Merchant Taylors', Westminster, Burford, Dulwich and Grimsby, though provision at all these establishments must have fluctuated with the aptitudes of successive masters.[13] We should not, however, assume that this is an exhaustive list. Other schools may have provided some musical instruction, even if it had not been specified in their charters. The boys from some schools were responsible during the seventeenth century for leading the singing of psalms in the parish church, and they presumably received preparatory instruction.[14] It is suggestive that the personal belongings of Thurstan Collinson, master of Blackburn Grammar School, included 'one lute a base violin & a Chithhorne [cittern] a recorder [and] 3 ould instruments' when he died in 1623. A quarter of a century later, the rector of Layston (Hertfordshire) bequeathed 'to the Schoole of Buntingford founded by Mistris Freeman of Aspeden my chest with five Violls & all my singinge bookes written and

[10] For pessimistic commentary, see David C. Price, *Patrons and Musicians of the English Renaissance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 36–8.

[11] DC/NW/3/1/1, fo. 103v, Nottinghamshire Archives (this inventory of the school's possessions, dated 1595, listed violins and violin books, anthems, service books and madrigals). See also Brenda M. Pask, *Newark Parish Church of St. Mary Magdalene* (Newark: District Church Council, 2000), pp. 236–8, and Jane Flynn, 'The Education of Choristers in England during the Sixteenth Century' in John Morehen (ed.), *English Choral Practice 1400–1650* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 180–99.

[12] See below, pp. 33, 81, 112–15.

[13] Price, *Patrons and Musicians*, pp. 36–8; Ian Spink, 'Music and Society', in Spink (ed.), *Music in Britain: The Seventeenth Century* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), pp. 25–6.

[14] See below, p. 425.

Figure 0.3. In this Elizabethan educational scene (1592), the beating of a boy draws the viewer's attention but in the opposite corner of the schoolroom there is musical notation on a board. Was music taught more widely than we realise? Hulton Archive/ Getty Images, 51240969 (RM).

printed'.[15] Neither of these two schools has featured on previous lists of educational establishments that offered music. Similarly indicative may be the Elizabethan woodcut depicting a schoolroom scene in which musical notation can clearly be seen on a board hanging from the wall (see Figure 0.3). If this was in any sense a representative portrayal, then we must consider the possibility that there was rather more music on offer in formally founded schools than has previously been assumed. The ample provision that existed at the universities may thus have presented

[15] *REED Lancashire*, p. 5 (the invaluable *REED* volumes contain collections of primary sources, but the pressures of space prevent me from including the original documentary references in my footnotes); ' "This little commonwealth": Layston Parish Memorandum Book', ed. Heather Falvey and Steve Hindle, *Hertfordshire Record Publications* 19 (2003), appendix 6 (I am grateful to Steve Hindle for drawing this piece of evidence to my attention). The musician Thomas Whythorne remarked that the general term 'schoolmaster' was often applied to teachers of music. See *The Autobiography of Thomas Whythorne: Modern Spelling Edition*, ed. James M. Osborn (London: Oxford University Press, 1962), pp. 193, 205.

students with opportunities for further development rather than an educational novelty.[16]

Our knowledge of music in the smaller 'petty' schools is even thinner. These institutions taught reading and writing to some at least of the country's poorer children, but very little can be said about their musical provision. There is one tantalising reference to a small chain of petty singing schools in Elizabethan Lincolnshire, but beyond this the sources are silent.[17] We can be sure, however, that basic musical education was sometimes offered to poor children as an act of charity, reflecting the belief that it could provide them with a means of employment (and perhaps with less tangible philosophical benefits too). Christ's Hospital in London, founded in 1553, provides the most famous example. Precise arrangements varied under the influence of new masters and successive benefactors, but during the seventeenth century a small minority of the young inmates were taught to read music and play instruments, while the majority of children learned to sing. The 'Easter psalms', performed by the children of Christ's Hospital, became an annual event.[18] Charitable tuition was offered elsewhere too. During the early years of the seventeenth century, the Collectors for the Poor in Bridgwater (Somerset) paid a musician called John Carewe (or Cary) twelve shillings per quarter 'for the teachinge of vi poore Children to singe'. They also offered Edward Edwards ten shillings 'to teache blinde Hopkins to play on the harpe for his better mayntenance'. In some places, poor children were formally bound to established musicians as apprentices. During the early seventeenth century, several examples were recorded in Southampton's 'Poor Child Register', the idea in each case being 'to dischardge the said towne of . . . and from keeping of the said childe'.[19] Clearly, the ability to make music, and in particular to sing, was understood to occupy an important position in the pauper's survival kit. Beneath this understanding lay three interrelated beliefs: that poor folk should be expected to work for their livings; that the poor person with a marketable skill had a better chance of survival than the mere beggar; and lastly, that singing was both acceptable and effective as a means of imploring charity from an audience. All three principles were set to work when, in 1574,

[16] On music at university, see Price, *Patrons and Musicians*, pp. 20–6; Helen M. Jewell, *Education in Early Modern England* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), pp. 19–20; Spink, 'Music and Society', pp. 27–8; Nan Cooke Carpenter, *Music in the Medieval and Renaissance Universities* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), pp. 153–208.

[17] See below, p. 425.

[18] E. H. Pearce, *Annals of Christ's Hospital* (London: Methuen, 1901), pp. 135–44, 225.

[19] *REED Somerset*, pp. 57, 58; *A Calendar of Southampton Apprenticeship Registers, 1609–1740*, ed. A. L. Merson, *Publications of the Southampton Record Society* 12 (1968), 65, 66, 73, 77.

Queen Elizabeth visited Bristol and was treated to 'a solemn song by Orphans' at the free school of St Bartholomew's.[20]

There were, therefore, many ways to learn music. Of course, these did not amount to a coherent system, but the various avenues to accomplishment can nevertheless help us to understand how it was that music was both ubiquitous and influential. Arguably, music was also the beneficiary of an age in which people felt things through their ears somewhat more acutely than we nowadays do. It is often said – with some exaggeration though not without justification – that we live in a visual age. Certainly, we tend to privilege sight over sound, and people regularly speak of having been to 'see' a concert. During the early modern period, there existed something more like parity between the two dominant senses.[21] This was reflected (or echoed) in common language and cultural practice. Where nowadays we speak of 'eye-witnesses', our ancestors spoke also of 'ear-witnesses'. Conflicting parties 'came together by the ears' and the villains of humorous ballads were sometimes 'lugg'd by the ears'. Indeed, the ears featured regularly in the contemporary culture of punishment, whether informal or formal. Out-of-tune choirboys were rung by the ears, while the ears of criminals could be burned, cut off or nailed to the pillory. To some extent, this was merely because ears stuck out and formed convenient targets, but it seems that the organs of hearing were also prominent in a deeper sense. They were a fundamental point of contact between self and society, and it was through the ears that many influences – for good and evil – made themselves felt. Cutting them off was not merely a practical mode of punishment, but a meaningful one too. The preacher Thomas Adams was even prepared to argue that ears were more powerful than eyes: 'The eare yet heares more, then ever the eye saw: and by reason of the patulous admission, derives that to the understanding, whereof the sight never had a glaunce.' He, at least, considered himself to be living in an era of the ear.[22]

Echoes, resonances and sympathies

A second important theme of this study will be music's significance within a wider culture that was characterised by richly associational thinking. Early modern people inhabited a vast and resonating universe of divine

[20] *REED Bristol*, p. 91.
[21] Jeremy Collier, *Essays upon Several Moral Subjects* (London, 1697), p. 20.
[22] *The Workes of Thomas Adams* (London, 1629), p. 148. On the ranking of the senses, see C. M. Woolgar, *The Senses in Late Medieval England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), pp. 23, 64.