Introduction

> [A]ny thing written in voice & especially to an Old English tune . . . made a more fixed Impression on the Minds of the Younger and Lower Class of People, than any written in Prose, which was often forgotten as soon as Read.
>
> – 'A friend to Church and State' to John Reeves' Association for the Preservation of Liberty and Property against Republicans and Levellers, 12 December 1792.[1]

If you happen to be a scholar of 1790s Britain, or of British ballads, then you are probably familiar with the quotation in the epigraph. Of the many excellent academics who have turned to the letter in recent years, most explain that they came across it in Roy Palmer's *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment*, published a generation ago in 1988.[2] Simon Bainbridge, Vic Gammon, and Ian Newman go on to include the anonymous correspondent's suggestion of 'putting them [i.e. copies of the song] . . . by twenties into the hands of Ballad Singers who might sing them for the sake of selling them'. So begins this book: in 1792, dawn of the ballad-singer's final heyday.

I reproduce this quotation for two reasons. The first is bibliographic: academics across the humanities are perhaps more interested in ballads,

[1] British Library Add. MSS 16922, fol. 43.

[2] Roy Palmer, *The Sound of History: Songs and Social Comment* (Oxford, 1988), 16–17. See, for example, Simon Bainbridge, 'Politics and Poetry', in Pamela Clemit (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to British Literature of the French Revolution in the 1790s* (Cambridge, 2011), 190–205, 195; Vic Gammon, 'The Grand Conversation: Napoleon and British Popular Balladry', *RSA Journal* 137 (1989): 665–74, 667; Vic Gatrell, *The Hanging Tree: Execution and the English People, 1770–1868* (Oxford, 1994), 141; Ffion Mair Jones, *Welsh Ballads of the French Revolution: 1793–1815* (Cardiff, 2012), 1; Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010), 284; Ian Newman, 'Moderation in the Lyrical Ballads: Wordsworth and the Ballad Debates of the 1790s', *Studies in Romanticism* 55 (2016): 185–210. Mark Philp quotes a similar letter by a female correspondent of Reeves in 'Politics and Memory: Nelson and Trafalgar in Popular Song', in Mark Philp, *Reforming Ideas in Britain* (Cambridge, 2014), 232–59, 233–4.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

and song in general, than ever. There is a growing demand for literature that is concerned, not with the content, but with the context of ballads, and that thinks extensively about how they worked. I hope this book will be helpful on that score. Secondly, as a first step in doing that thinking, the letter is worth one more look. Its writer does not use the terms 'ballad' and 'broadside', but rather 'voice' – suggesting something more, I think, than simply verse in contrast to prose – which she or he couples with 'tune'. It is the sonic, vocalised, lyrical, and explicitly musical object that makes the 'fixed Impression'. Furthermore, the correspondent goes on to hope that ballad-singers 'might sing them for the sake of selling them'. Songs did not operate in a vacuum, or in accordance with the dictates of their writers. They were sung by independent agents known as ballad-singers: people with their own agendas and their own living to make, who were already in the business of performing and selling songs *of all kinds*, not just moral or political pieces. These are the people – women, men, children – that I would like to think about: people plying a trade in the London street that centred on musical performance as a mechanism for selling printed songs, exactly as they had done since the start of the reign of Elizabeth I, and as they would continue to do well into the reign of Victoria, where both their story and this book end.

In this book, I seek to write the history of the ballad-singer: a central agent in numerous cultural, social, and political processes of continuity, contestation, and change across Western Europe between the later sixteenth and the late nineteenth centuries. The English term 'ballad-singer' appears to have been an invention of the 1590s,[3] and in the Victorian period it began to lose coherence among a raft of alternatives, all of which denoted something slightly different: chaunter, patterer, long-song seller, street vocalist, busker. For the three centuries in between, however, its usage remained remarkably consistent, referring to a low-status and low-income individual of questionable legality, whose primary occupation was the dissemination of printed songs, generally by direct sale for small change, in public places, primarily the street, and who sang these songs as part of the process. In the period under discussion in these pages, ballad-singers' songs' musical notation was almost never printed, the words being set instead as verse (often accompanied by image), leaving the onus upon the seller to supply – and sometimes even to choose – the tune.

'Ballad-singer' was an intrinsically loaded term, and while it would be interpreted differently by individuals of various class and interest groups,

[3] Angela McShane, 'Political street songs and singers in seventeenth-century England', *Renaissance Studies* 33 (2019): 94–118, 95 and 102.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

those interpretations all rested on an engagement with the same central idea: that of a highly audible subaltern voice, playing a prominent and influential role in public discourse and public culture. This basic identity was often reduced to a stock type by the legislators, artists, playwrights, etymologists, and many other persons whose representations of ballad-singers figure so largely in the historical record, and to an extent this speaks to a historical truth. Anyone who took up ballad singing placed themselves within an immediately recognisable category, one that by 1792 had at least two centuries of associated meaning behind it. That category – shabby, scurrilous, loud – is worth holding on to. But it is equally true that, right from their beginnings across Renaissance Europe – England, Italy, and the Netherlands in particular – the profession was almost paradoxically defined by its heterogeneity, fluidity, and liminality. A recent special issue of *Renaissance Studies* has focused on this 'elusive' character, its editors remarking: 'Even more than the category itself, however, it was each individual street singer that could be (and typically was) extremely many-sided.'[4] Articles within that collection stress the 'remarkable social mix' and 'constant mobility' of such performers – not only spatially and culturally but also socially, in providing 'a focal point where the culture of the piazza and that of the *palazzo* collided'.[5] While this heterogeneity presents a historiographical challenge that I have occasionally failed to meet – there are many generalisations in what follows – it is also of vital importance in understanding the world in which ballad-singers worked. It is by appreciating singers as relatively autonomous individuals, rather than as uniform and unthinking mouthpieces for the songs they sold, that we come to grips with how culture and society operated through their mediation: not by a clear, structured separation of high and low cultures, or within a strict set of categories for politics and entertainment, but by means of a mainstream that was, above all, *mixed*.

London in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was no exception to this rule. As one 1837 survey put it: 'John Bull . . . has "stomach for 'em all" . . . rich or poor, naked or clad, old or young, masculine or feminine, so as they have but something to sell, say, or sing, and present themselves in the streets of the metropolis, he is sure to stop and make a purchase.'[6] Thus, to draw solely on examples encountered in these

[4] Luca Degl'Innocenti and Massimo Rospocher, 'Introduction', in their edited collection, *Street Singers in Renaissance Europe*, special issue of *Renaissance Studies* 33, no. 1 (2019): 5–16, 7 and 12.

[5] McShane, 'Political Street Song', 118; Luca Degl'Innocenti and Massimo Rospocher, 'Urban Voices: The Hybrid Figure of the Street Figure in Renaissance Italy', in Degl'Innocenti and Rospocher, *Street Singers*, 17–41, 19.

[6] 'Jack Rag' (ed.), *Streetology of London; or, the Metropolitan Papers of the Itinerant Club* (1837), 82.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

pages, a London ballad-singer could be a boy of twelve, a girl of nineteen, a mother of three, a blind ancient. Hailing from Wapping, Wexford, the West Indies, and residing in Seven Dials, Whitechapel, Southwark – in garret or gutter, boarding- or bawdy-house. They might be an orphan, a spouse, a discharged veteran; lately of the Opera House, a jeweller's, a merchant bank; of the army, scullery, or rookery; concurrently a beggar, tailor, thief, writer, pensioner, weaver, prostitute, preacher. By the name of David Love, an earnest old Scot; Ann Lee, a desperate young felon; Joseph Johnson, a disabled West Indian sailor. In short, a drunken, teetotal, rapist, evangelist, knowing, prudish, communist, liberal, xenophobic, cosmopolitan, patriotic, cynical, timid, upstart, deferential, oratorical, boorish wit. Their singing might be excellent, abysmal, idiosyncratic, or simply adequate, and their patter just as variable. Nor were the songs they sold any less disparate: of love or loss; the soil or the sea; conflicts of class, nation, gender; comedy or tragedy; sex or salvation. Composed any time from three centuries ago to earlier that morning, their lyrics written by Shakespeare, Dickens, or the penniless ballad-monger John Morgan, by the anonymous bard of antiquity or the equally unknown Grub Street hack. Their tunes taken from opera house, theatre, pleasure garden, church, country dance, from anywhere across the Atlantic archipelago, America, Europe . . . and this product printed on a two-song broadside or single slip, or – as time went on – on a long sheet or in a songster, the paper uniformly poor and the words invariably smudged, cramped, pirated, the whole thing sold for small change, for the halfpennies that clinked in the pocket of all but the very poorest Londoner. A product that was at once literature and music, yet that was consistently denied the legitimacy of either by those whose words or images were printed by more respectable publishers.

What Song Has to Offer (I)

Given this rather overwhelming variability, it is doubly important to remember the unifying factor: these people sold and sang printed songs in the street.[7] It is because of that function that they are of such

[7] I must concede that songs were not always – or not only – sung, but also viewed, read, or read aloud. Abigail Williams has noted the vast number of ballads that were incorporated into commonplace books, while of the many scholars to claim that ballads were often pasted onto 'the walls of cottages and little alehouses', only David Atkinson has traced this assertion to a source – the memoirs of Thomas Holcroft – in defence of his ongoing (and highly productive) argument that we should also consider songs as texts, separable from their sung iterations. Crucially, however, Atkinson sees this focus as complementary, not antithetical, to a consideration of their aural transmission. See Abigail Williams, *The Social Life of Books: Reading Together in the Eighteenth-Century Home* (Yale, 2017);

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

historical importance: as mediators – gatekeepers, in twenty-first-century parlance – of a dominant cultural product. Until the later nineteenth century, song was perhaps the only universal form of expression, accessible to all irrespective of age, class, or sex, excluding only, in its aural form, the deaf (and even here, it is worth noting that Harriet Martineau, the most notable and eloquent sufferer of deafness in Britain in the period, both wrote and enjoyed songs). The years under discussion were the last, in Western Europe at any rate, in which song, not 'music', was the dominant and indeed only universal category of musical expression and thinking; this was still a time when instrumental music was a minority interest, only consumed by the masses when subordinated to the function of dance, and song still reigned supreme in both theory and practice.[8] Song was cheaper, more comprehensible, and more portable than either the newspaper or the caricature; unlike the sermon it could cross (as well as reinforce) sectarian divides; the spaces of its enjoyment were exceptionally varied, bridging the public and private, the sociable and the solitary. As a hybrid form, song could appear by proxy within other types of music and literature – the dance, the march, the journal, novel, or chapbook – and even withstand the separation of its constituent elements, so that quotation of a lyric might bring to mind a melody, or the performance of a few bars summon forth the words. Song was used in everything from manual labour to court ceremony, worship to revelry, and there can have been few persons in the metropolis that did not hear song on a daily basis.

As such, there are precious few forms of historical enquiry to which song is not germane – not merely as incidental colour, but as a practice of some influence. Song mediated everything from gender and class relations to national identity, via race, empire, innovation and technology, sex, humour, faith, superstition, medicine, commerce, and education – there really was a song for everything. Rather wonderfully, given the inherent ephemerality of the medium, we still have access to many of these songs in their printed form: among many excellent digitised archives, the Bodleian alone has 'nearly 30,000 songs' available online, while the British Library has recently partnered with the English Broadside Ballad Archive (based at the University of California Santa Barbara) to digitise its own collection

David Atkinson, *The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts* (Cambridge, 2014); and Thomas Holcroft, *Memoirs of the Late Thomas Holcroft*, 3 vols. (1816), vol. 1, 135–6.

[8] Gary Tomlinson has long since suggested the term 'cantology' as a replacement for musicology, as the default mode of engagement with musical experience before the nineteenth-century rise of instrumental music: see especially his 'Vico's Songs: Detours at the Origins of (Ethno)Musicology' in Gary Tomlinson, *Music and Historical Critique: Selected Essays* (Aldershot, 2007), 197–230.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

in sound and colour.[9] There is the opportunity here for a whole field of rigorous historical enquiry, and it is one that many scholars have begun to embrace.

The Question of Contrafacta

Until very recently, the 'big idea' in ballad scholarship, among both the early modernists and the scholars of this period who have taken songs seriously as musical objects, has been that of contrafacta. Borrowed from medievalist scholarship of the mid-twentieth century, a contrafactum is defined in Grove as 'the substitution of one text for another without substantial change to the music . . . most commonly applied to the practice of composing new poems to older melodies'.[10] Put simply, it means a song with new words but an old tune, a standard compositional practice for ballads, and one seized upon by scholars because of the associative potential for audiences if the substitution was recognised. Historians in particular have been drawn to the generation of political meaning by such juxtapositions – as, for example, a radical rewrite of a loyalist anthem.[11] At its best, thinking about contrafacta in this way allows us to use melody as a way of accessing nothing less than a secret history of meaning.

Even for a non-specialist, the semantic connection between melody and lyric is easy to grasp. Without thinking about it, try singing the Hebrew word usually written in English as either 'Hallelujah' or 'Alleluia'. If you are a scholar raised in a Western Anglophone tradition, the chances are that you will opt for one of three four-note melodies given in Example 0.1 and indelibly associated with, respectively: a much-covered pop song from the 1980s; the Hallelujah Chorus from Handel's *Messiah*; and a hymn learnt and sung in many English schools. In each case, the meanings and memories generated by the same word are both powerful and distinct – and easily grasped without recourse to the musical notation.

1 Hal - le - lu - jah... 2 Ha - lle - lu - jah! 3 A - le - lu - ia!

Example 0.1 Three settings of the word 'Hallelujah'

[9] ballads.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/about. The British Library project is being led by Christian Algar.

[10] www.oxfordmusiconline.com/grovemusic/view/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.001.0001/omo-9781561592630-e-0000006361

[11] Kate Bowan and Paul A. Pickering, *Sounds of Liberty: Music, Radicalism and Reform in the Anglophone World, 1790–1914* (Manchester, 2017), makes exceptionally good and frequent use of contrafacta throughout, and as defined ibid., 17.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

As may be apparent even from this simple example, however, the significance of each melody is likely to vary depending on both the singer and the listener: on whether, for instance, you think of Leonard Cohen, John Cale, Jeff Buckley, Rufus Wainwright, k.d. lang, Alexandra Burke, or Susan Boyle performing the first song; on your religious creed or lack thereof; on whether you went to a Church of England school, or are familiar with the descending peal of church bells evoked by the third musical phrase. A melody alone does not contain semantic meaning. Rather, meaning is generated in the relationship between (performed) song and listener, and whether that listener identifies with it as an individual or as part of a collective. As Anindita Ghosh has written of street song in nineteenth-century Kolkata, listeners were constantly 'filtering the performances in the light of their own experiences and knowledge'.[12] To take another famous modern parallel: the Rodgers and Hammerstein composition 'You'll Never Walk Alone' from the 1945 musical *Carousel* often moves me to tears when sung at Liverpool football matches – but less because of the immediate context (I support Arsenal) than because I have sung it at the funeral of a close friend's father – and even then, I am loth to put my response down to association alone. Other factors are in play.

Thinking about songs as contrafacta remains extremely productive, even when we concede that the recognition of a melody by a listener and the range of meanings this might generate were contingent. Politically, the fact that only part of an audience might 'get' the association being made is in itself of interest – in our period, for example, there was a thriving culture of electoral contrafacta that circulated among exclusive, enfranchised, partisan communities, and in this context the sharing of a musical reference understood only by 'insiders' might reinforce both bonds and barriers. But I think that, as historians, we can overestimate the importance of melodic association. In our own twenty-first-century musical soundscape, contrafacta are rare artefacts confined largely to the realm of comic parody. In a world where, by contrast, contrafactum was the default mode of composition, we can attribute immoderate significance to a choice of tune: when the same melody provided a setting for dozens of songs, the associative power of the original must often (though by no means always) have been relatively weak, and susceptible to overwriting. The comic Irish song 'Sprig of Shillelah', originally the bawdy 'Black Joke', and 'God Save the King/Queen', originally a Jacobite drinking song, are two prominent examples of ostensibly fixed but in fact overwritten associations.

[12] Anindita Ghosh, 'Singing in a New World: Street Songs and Urban Experience in Colonial Calcutta', *History Workshop Journal* 76 (2013): 111–36, 113.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

While I do not wish to dismiss the undoubted importance of contrafacta, it is good to see discussion broadening into other areas. The risk of emphasising contrafacta – and I speak as a guilty party – is this: by assigning meaning to a *tune* based on that tune's earliest or most famous lyrical accompaniment, and then mapping that lyrical association on to a subsequent lyric, we effectively remove the musical component altogether: the tune becomes a shorthand, a signifier for old words, for an old title. At its worst this could become a way for us as scholars, despite our best intentions, to avoid talking about performance and music altogether, returning to a discussion centred entirely on written texts.[13] There is much more that thinking about songs as musical performances can bring to the historical conversation.

What Song Has to Offer (II)

As I will elaborate later in this book, and as hinted at by the anonymous correspondent with whom I began, song was 'universally acknowledged' in this period to exert a 'magic power' over listeners – a belief that was not without justification.[14] The musicalised performance of text was a mode of discourse of such rhetorical potency that it preoccupied philosophers and politicians throughout the period, just as it had done for centuries.[15] Jean-Jacques Rousseau, in privileging song as 'the highest musical genre' due to what he perceived as the naturally affective power of melody in the manipulation of the passions,[16] was echoing the fifteenth-century Florentine philosopher Marsilio Ficino's belief that song 'imitates and enacts everything so forcefully that it immediately provokes both the singer and the hearers to imitate and enact the same

[13] In my own *Napoleon and British Song, 1797–1822* (Basingstoke, 2015), I sometimes make this lapse, for example, on 124–5 and 158. While I would not wish to cite others' examples, this is a tendency I have observed repeatedly in conversation at workshops and conferences, and it occasionally creeps in to the writing of historians and literary scholars. Current musicologists, by contrast, sometimes seem excessively sceptical of contrafacta, as part of a wider resistance to the erroneous idea of objective musical meaning and the work-concept; to the new musicology, melody is infinitely more protean than the folklorist or political historian would have it.

[14] 'National Odes', *The Satirist, or, Monthly Meteor* 2 (May 1808): 239–45, 239. Ian McCalman conflates various parts of this anonymous essay to summarise, not unfairly, 'that people like Hannah More were alarmed because the song possessed a special, deeply rooted "magic power" in English popular culture', in his *Radical Underworld: Prophets, Revolutionaries and Pornographers in London, 1795–1840* (Cambridge, 1988), 118.

[15] See Chapter 2.

[16] Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, 1991), 15; Tomlinson, 'Vico's Songs', 215. Tomlinson also observes that 'In secular and sacred arenas alike, song exerted a force worrisome on account of its evident strength' – ibid., 201.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE
Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

things'.[17] In early modern England, song was held to delight, to ravish, and above all to compel its suggestible listeners.[18] This belief in song's practical agency also found expression in 1830s London, as one anonymous writer declared that 'of all songs I love a ballad – the delightful mixture of sense with melody, which, passing through the ear to the heart, not only conveys pleasure of the most thrilling kind, but leaves us in that mood best suited to the exercise of individual friendship, or good-will to our fellow men'.[19] Across five centuries and three European cultures, the idea endured that song exerted a powerful and above all a socialised force in performance, because of its unique combination of words and musical tones. Nor has this historical perspective been discredited since. In an influential study of post-war popular music, John Street has written of song's 'ability to draw people together and to find a common resonance in their private feelings', while the cognitive psychologist Bruce McConachie concludes that audiences *simulate* the emotions they encounter 'through sounds as well as sights', adapting the philosopher Robert Gordon's observation that 'you can catch an emotion, just as you can catch a cold'.[20] Song, in short, can be contagious, and like any contagion, it catches best in crowds:[21] it 'animates imagined communities, aggregating its listeners into virtual collectivities or publics'.[22]

At first, it is difficult to reconcile these grand claims with the rhetoric of ephemerality and vulgarity that dominates representations of ballad-singers and their repertoires. Yet it is in the sphere of the mundane, everyday street song that such arguments have most weight, for they apply irrespective of the level of musicianship in play. As Carolyn Abbate writes, a song 'takes things that might in themselves seem unremarkable . . . and, by decking them out with acoustic aura and

[17] Cited in a modern translation in Gary Tomlinson, *Metaphysical Song: An Essay on Opera* (Princeton, 1999), 12.
[18] Simon Smith, *Musical Response in the Early Modern Playhouse, 1603–1625* (Cambridge, 2017), 26–68.
[19] W. R., 'Ballad Singers', *Leigh Hunt's London Journal* 27 (1 October 1834): 211.
[20] John Street, *Rebel Rock: The Politics of Popular Music* (Oxford, 1986), 223. Bruce McConachie, *Engaging Audiences: A Cognitive Approach to Spectating in the Theatre* (Basingstoke, 2008), 66–8.
[21] Recent research into physiological synchrony among theatre audiences also notes a tendency for audience members' heartbeats to synchronise during an affecting performance. See www.ucl.ac.uk/pals/news/2017/nov/audience-members-hearts-beat-together-theatre.
[22] Georgina Born, 'For a Relational Musicology: Music and Interdisciplinarity, Beyond the Practice Turn', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 135 (2010): 205–43, 232. For further influential formulations of the same idea, see especially Jonathan Culler (paraphrasing Robert von Hallberg) in Jonathan Culler, *Theory of the Lyric* (Harvard, 2015), 351; and Abbate, *Unsung Voices*, 12.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org

CAMBRIDGE

Cambridge University Press & Assessment
978-1-108-82108-7 — The Ballad-Singer in Georgian and Victorian London
Oskar Cox Jensen
Excerpt
More Information

sonic gift wrap . . . [makes] them less banal than they are by themselves. The ordinary becomes a revelation.'[23] It is hard to appreciate this when *looking* at a broadside, its paper torn, its rhymes clumsy. But in performance, the addition of melody to even the most hackneyed words supplies the lyricism, injects the eloquence, and transcends the inadequacies of the verse. This is the essence of the 'magic power' of song: that it is a form of heightened speech, the achievement of rhetoric by other means. When a street urchin sang a common ditty, that singer assumed a higher rhetorical status, engaging in a mode of cultural articulation that, for the duration of the song, could elevate the singer and beguile the listener. Thus it was that, in the words of another anonymous scribbler, 'Even the ragged beggar listened once as if entranced . . . and forgot his misery a moment.'[24]

Best of all – and I cannot put this forcefully enough – the study of song has much to contribute to more traditional fields of history. As my second chapter makes clear, the phenomenon I have just described and the practical consequences it produced disturbed the sleep of magistrates and moralists, peers and politicians. Song made the disenfranchised articulate and the insensible susceptible: what was being sung in the streets was of national concern. Songs are not historically illustrative so much as they are historically *active*; they 'have their own temporality, and are themselves a constitutive force in history'.[25] Beyond the incendiary or insidious potential of their political or moral rhetoric, the performance of songs, especially by ballad-singers, affected other important historical processes: the racialisation of the urban poor; the (trans)formation of both local and national communities; experiences of migration and belonging; the operation of class relations in general and charity in particular; controversies of urban improvement; the lower-class appropriation of self-consciously elitist cultural capital; the economy of makeshift and the balance of power within petty capitalism – in short, many of the issues that defined the nineteenth-century city.

This is why I have chosen to focus solely on the ballad-singer in London: while the scale is manageable, it avoids excessive parochialism, as things not only happened first in London, they happened *more*. As the capital of what became, during the period, the world's leading imperial power, London was in dialogue with its hinterland, the British regions,

[23] Carolyn Abbate, 'Music—Drastic or Gnostic?', *Critical Inquiry* 30 (2004): 505–36, 517–18.
[24] Q.Q., 'Old and New Ballads', *Monthly Magazine* Series 3, vol. 9 (March 1843): 185–92, 190.
[25] Georgina Born, paraphrasing the anthropologist Christopher Pinney, in Born, 'For a Relational Musicology', 239.

© in this web service Cambridge University Press & Assessment www.cambridge.org