GENERAL INTRODUCTION

Historical, Social and Musical Contexts of a Forgotten Repertory

An anonymous writer contributing to the nineteenth edition of *The Picture of London* in 1818 observed that ‘The capital of England is not celebrated for the number of its places of public amusement’.

However, the subtitle of this early nineteenth-century publication claimed it to be ‘a correct guide to all the curiosities, amusements, public establishments, and remarkable objects, in and near London’. With so much music-making in and around London in the early nineteenth century, near-contemporary accounts and modern scholarship readily disproves that London was a cultural wasteland. Perhaps the writer was either unfamiliar with the common street culture, or dismissed it as inferior or debased and, therefore, irrelevant to highbrow/bourgeois tastes and sensibilities. Or, to paraphrase that well-worn quip of Samuel Johnson’s, perhaps this unnamed writer had simply tired of London, and of life in general.

Whatever the opinions of this writer in *The Picture of London*, early nineteenth-century London was home to a thriving cultural life for all of society, rich and poor. While our unnamed commentator can confidently be dismissed as unreliable, the same cannot be said of Henry Mayhew. His *London Labour and the London Poor*, published in four volumes between 1861 and 1862, paints a rather different picture. Long mined by historians, Mayhew’s enormous project is a credible chronicle of early nineteenth-century London life. Although it was published in the 1860s this work was a long time in the making and it is reasonable to assume that his observations are relevant to the 1830s and 1840s, the time that the bawdy songsters under discussion in this present project were printed. Mayhew’s work is valuable for its observations on a large range of topics – from the price of vegetables to statistics of coffee consumption in London – and for his reliance on people to describe the city as they saw it. During the timeframe in which Mayhew worked on this project, he interviewed a number of street musicians, and their comments and experiences help place the position of bawdy songsters in historical context.
London Labour and the London Poor investigates a number of musical topics including long-song sellers, sellers of street songs, English street bands, street vocalists, glee-singers, ballad-singers, penny gaffs and chaunters – but Mayhew has virtually nothing to say on bawdy or obscene songs. Mayhew’s level of detail is exacting – very specific data is collected from his informants or noted in his observations. For example, in describing the wares of the long-song sellers, Mayhew provides the following description:

The long-song sellers did not depend upon patter – though some of them patter a little – to attract customers, but on the veritable cheapness and novel form in which they vended popular songs, printed on paper rather wider than this page, ‘three songs abreast,’ and the paper was about a yard long, which constituted the ‘three’ yards of song. Sometimes three slips were pasted together. The vendors paraded around the streets with their ‘three yards of new and popular songs’ for a penny. The songs are, or were, generally fixed to the top of a long pole, and the vendor ‘cried’ the different titles as he went along.4

Details of sales techniques, manufacture and trading conditions, packaging, publicity and price are all revealed in this lively account of the wares of long-song sellers. Mayhew discusses the quantities of the song-sheets, and explains where they were sold. In his analysis of street band culture, Mayhew’s informants detail the number of musicians active in such bands in London, how they learn their instruments, and the instruments they use.5 In his interview with two Ethiopian serenaders Mayhew describes their rehearsal techniques and the places where they rehearsed, and also notes that his subjects considered the gentry as their best customers.6 In sections on street ballad-singers or chaunters we learn that such song tunes ‘are mostly picked up from the street bands, and sometimes from the cheap concerts, or from the gallery of the theatre, where the street ballad-singers very often go, for the express purpose of learning the airs’.7

Bawdy songs, or songs that Mayhew or his informants describe as ‘indecent,’ are rarely mentioned. According to Mayhew himself, ‘Indecent songs are not sold by the pinners-up. One man of whom I made inquiries was quite indignant that I should even think it necessary to ask such questions.’8 One of Mayhew’s informants wrote to him that ‘The comic songs that are popular in the street are never indecent, but are very often political’.9

Despite the large number of bawdy songs reproduced in this study, popular music has remained relatively unexplored in major nineteenth-century music histories.10 From our postmodern vantage point it is easy to accuse twentieth-century historians of historical chauvinism, but it must be remembered that the field of nineteenth-century music studies itself is relatively new. The first journal devoted to music of the period, 19th-Century Music, was launched as late as 1977, with the second specialist journal, Nineteenth-Century Music Review, first published in 2004. Of course the preoccupations of the above-mentioned
scholars of nineteenth-century music were the grand narratives of Romanticism and the production of high-art music which, as Charles Hamm notes, led most of them to 'ignore all music lying outside the Western classical repertory'.

The distinction between high art/low art, and highbrow/lowlbrow music, is contentious. The gap between the musics of these oppositional pairings is commonly attributed to the social divide which existed between elites and non-elites in the early nineteenth century, though this opposition wrongly assumes that both classes held mutually exclusive leisure and cultural interests. As Tim Harris has highlighted, illustrated broadsides, ballads and chapbooks were 'accessible to those on the margins of literacy or even people who were illiterate'. He also argues that 'gentry and people from the more prosperous middling ranks of society accounted for a significant proportion of the buyers of such material'.

Since the 1960s, the nomenclature used to denote the leisure or cultural interests of those outside the elite has included terms such as 'popular', 'common', 'plebeian', 'lowlbrow', 'trivial' and 'lower-class'. Back in 1999 — and wary of using labels — Iain McCalman and Maureen Perkins positioned this historiographical divide as follows:

Modern studies tend to find popular culture an elusive concept, though there is rough agreement that it encompasses the common people's world of work, attitudes to the natural world, education, literacy and knowledge, health practices, gender and generational roles, religious beliefs, recreational and leisure pursuits, and community customs.

Bawdy songs from the 1830s and '40s do not conform to the easily partitioned world of elite and mass culture. While numerous studies have been undertaken on a variety of nineteenth-century British songbooks in the local context, there has only been one study of bawdy songs in the nineteenth century: Bawdy Songs of the Early Music Hall compiled by George Speaight and published in 1975. It reproduces a small number of songs from a collection held by the British Library — the same collection that forms the basis of the present publication. As Speaight explains, a tip-off led to a 'fortunate discovery' during his research into the history of the English toy theatre:

I was led by a clue provided by Mr Gerald Morice, [which] has revealed a cache of slim booklets published by the theatrical printseller, William West, at 57 Wych Street, Strand. They carry such titles as The Randy Songster or The Cuckold's Nest of Choice, Flash, Smutty and Delicious Songs and record the songs sung at the Coal Hole, the Cider Cellars, Offley's and, no doubt, similar establishments. As far as I am aware, they have never been reprinted, and, indeed, their existence was practically unknown and unrecorded, apart from an entry in Ashbee's bibliography of pornographic books and an inaccurate reference in Ivan Bloch's Sexual Life in England of 1901.
Speaight's volume consists of an introduction that outlines the tradition of bawdy songs in some detail, including a section on their publishing history, and writes briefly on the two principal supper rooms at which these songs were sung – the Coal Hole and Cider Cellars – and describes some of the personalities associated with the songs, such as Joe Wells, Tom Hudson and J. H. Munyard. Speaight then lists the ten songsters from which he has made his selection, noting that:

The coarseness of these songs may offend us today – and there are some featuring scatological humour and an obsession with venereal disease that I have not cared to reprint – but we should see them in the atmosphere of the time as representing another facet of the lusty theatrical life of the period.

Reproduced in the original type – but not at their original sizes – the songs are accompanied by black-and-white reproductions of hand-coloured engravings that were printed at the front of each songster. Speaight also provides reproductions of sheet music to the songs he includes. But the text contains no annotations or glossing, except for the briefest and general 'Notes to the Songs' which is a half-page explanation of only two words: 'ling' and 'spend'; and one attribution of a song's air. Speaight explained that he believed detailed glossing and annotations were unnecessary because 'Most of the sexual slang used in these songs is still in current use, though the basic four-letter Anglo-Saxon monosyllables are never employed. A few terms may, however, be unfamiliar to modern readers.'

This present project, *Bawdy Songbooks of the Romantic Period*, was inspired by Speaight's volume. Our appetites were whetted by the knowledge that his collection was only the tip of a chapbook iceberg housed at the British Library. The songs in his volume suggested an enormously rich collection that had passed from oral to print culture, which was at its peak during the transition of the inn and tavern to music hall, from the late eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. This repertory is not mentioned at all or given only the briefest accounts in histories of the music hall and other literature, and thus a gap in the musicological literature was identified. Furthermore, it became very obvious to us that Speaight's assertion that 'A few terms may, however, be unfamiliar to modern readers' was rather wide of the mark: the language used in these songs is largely unknown to twenty-first century readers and requires extensive annotation and glossing.

This is a substantial project: four volumes featuring just over 1,100 song texts. Since our initial research suggested that it would not be possible to identify and locate sheet music for most of the songs, identifying and locating only a selection of them would have frustrated our readers and ourselves. It is also quite likely that an extensive search for printed music would turn up many editions or
versions of the same piece in all parts of the English-speaking world, and sorting, dating and choosing between them would be an almost impossible task. Consequently, it was decided to leave this task for future researchers.

**Traditions and Dissemination**

George Speaight rightly positions the bawdy songs reproduced in his volume in wider historical context by tracing the use of such songs in the Middle Ages, in the works of Shakespeare and Robert Burns, and in the song collection of Cecil Sharp. But bawdy songs are not, of course, the domain of the British alone. Ed Cray has written the definitive account of bawdy songs in North America, and there are scores of American, Canadian and Australian works among the several hundred books and manuscripts in the Jack Horntip Collection. Among the studies of a less scholarly nature are collections of songs by Australian writers Malcolm Jones and Don Laycock. While Jones and his peers recall songs from their days playing rugby, Laycock's first book attempts to document a specifically Australian repertoire. Laycock sees the domain of the bawdy songs as a quintessentially Anglophone phenomenon:

The men of Great Britain, Australia, America, Canada — in fact, of all the countries of the world to which the English language has been transported — have one thing in common: their love for the dirty song ... Speakers of other languages don't have the same feeling for this art form ... Only in an English-speaking country does the dirty song flourish in its pristine purity, as an activity of males denied — or petrified of — any other outlet for their sexuality.

Such Anglocentricity is surely misguided and wrong, not least because it assumes only one sort of migration: across the seas in a mother tongue. Yet, these bawdy songs travelled, if only across London, if only in English. Many of the secondary sources discuss the principal locales in which these bawdy songs were sung — the Coal Hole and the Cider Cellar — but these were not the only places where this repertory found favour. Indeed, a list of all the places where some of these songs were sung yields almost thirty specific establishments or locations, as well as one song that claimed to be sung 'Everywhere' (see the Index of Venues in Volume 4 of this edition). It can only be speculated that the printing of these songsters not only gave the songs stability in print but made them physically portable, making them available to audiences and singers at many more venues. But such transmission, of course, assumes that their patrons knew the tunes from which the printed words could spring to life.

The venues in which these bawdy songs were sung were late-night supper rooms, which grew out of the eighteenth-century inn, tavern and coffee house but which were a precursor to the later institution, the music hall. The key ingredient for the success of these supper rooms was a simple formula: 'eating,
drinking and entertainment' or, in other words, conviviality. In the 1830s and '40s these venues (sometimes also referred to as clubs) were frequented only by men, although prostitutes and courtesans were frequent guests. John Timbs in *Clubs and Club Life in London* (c. 1872) described this institution as follows:

The Club, in the general acceptation of the term, may be regarded as one of the earli­est offshoots of Man's habitually gregarious and social inclination; and as an instance of that remarkable influence which, in an early stage of society, the powers of Nature exercise over the fortunes of mankind.

Timbs saw the club as a refuge for men. Francis Sheppard, writing in 1971, saw it in similar terms:

The need for masculine refuge from this exhausting social turmoil was perhaps one of the causes for the great proliferation of gentleman's clubs in the nineteenth century. The convivial tradition inaugurated in the coffee-houses of St. James's Street and Pall Mall in the days of Addison, Steele and Swift had been maintained throughout the eighteenth century by the great propriety clubs like White's, Brocks's and Boodles, was now to take on a more sedate and imposing aspect appropriate to the age.

The supper rooms of the early nineteenth century, the homes to the bawdy songs in these volumes, were hardly sedate. E. Beresford Chancellor described the Cider Cellars and other establishments as 'questionable environments'; Serjeant Ballantyne confirmed this view and, like Augusts Sala, appeared just as taken - if not more so - by the food rather than the music on offer:

The suppers served there [Evans's, Coal Hole, Cider Cellars, Offleys] were excellent, and, in addition, there was singing, the habitués sitting at the same table with the singers. There were some good songs excellently sung, but there were others of a degrading and filthy character.

The best-known supper rooms were the Coal Hole, Cider Cellars, Offley's and Evans's: indeed, detailed recollections of these establishments have been recorded in various autobiographies and histories and the musical and gastronomic delights are often given pride of place in this literature. Yet there appear to have been at least two strata of such establishments, as the music hall historian Laurence Senelick has noted:

At the up-market end, there were the Song-and-Supper Rooms, late-night hang outs of the aristocracy, professional men, bohemians and university students, redolent of sizzling mutton chops and expensive cigars; there the exclusively male audience would be regaled by the exclusively male singers, paid for their services. Such club-like institutions as the Coal Hole, the Cyder Cellars and Evans's have received the lion's share of attention from scholars ... Slightly lower on the social scale were imitations of these clubs, peopled with clerks, tradesmen and like amateurs, such as the 'select convivial circle called the Glorious Apollers' ... At the down-market end, aromatic of
gin and church warden pipes, were the 'Free and Easies,' public house gatherings of the working classes.

The memoirs of George Augustus Sala provide an illuminating record of the convivial setting of Evans's and other institutions. Although his autobiography was not published until 1858 it refers to earlier times and provides a valuable insight into the prevailing culture of Evans's during the period in which these bawdy songbooks were printed. Sala writes of Evans's famous 'sing-song' culture and names other establishments patronized by the 'English country gentleman': the Bedford, Tavistock and Hummuns and 'other kindred Covent Garden hotels.' Sala also writes of the decline of the supper rooms, or what he describes as 'night cellars,' noting that even though similar establishments existed in Liverpool, they had 'almost died out in London.' In lamenting the night cellars from a century before, Sala notes: 'But the night cellars of a hundred years ago! What dens, what sinks, what roaring saturnalia of very town scoundrelism they must have been!' He is, of course, observing that the night cellar had become moderately respectable; and it is worth noting that Sala reports that a certain Captain Costigan was barred from singing at Evans's – presumably because he was a singer of bawdy songs, which were no longer cherished by the club's new owners.

Songs could also be transplanted or disseminated by a particular vocalist, such as Costigan, or through mimicry. As Speaight has noted, it is likely that singers performed in various venues, including Vauxhall Gardens. Moreover, Mayhew's account of music-making in the capital in the first half of the nineteenth century revealed that learning music by ear was commonplace and that many troupes rehearsed openly in the streets. The transmission of bawdy songs through imitation – and foreign contact – is also likely. According to one of Mayhew's informants there were three public houses in London 'kept by Germans' and with some songs in this present volume being set to texts representing a German accent, it may be that the presence of these accented songs is linked to the presence of German inns, bands and visitors from German-speaking nations.

It is also likely that patrons from abroad who visited London inns would have shared and learned new songs. Clearly, the potential for the dissemination of music, especially songs, in the early nineteenth century was very great.

Even though the songs were frequently bawdy they do not appear to have been censored. This greatly irked one Rev. William Tuckniss, BA, who in his introductory essay in the fourth volume of Mayhew's *London Labour and the London Poor* expressed his outrage that the Society for the Suppression of Vice had turned a blind eye to the immoral goings-in in the supper clubs:

The demoralizing influence of low theatres, and the licentious corruptions of the Coal Hole, and Posés Plastiques, might surely afford scope for vigorous prosecutions under the society's auspices; and yet these dens, in which the vilest passions of
mankind are stimulated, and every sentiment of religion, virtue, and decency grossly outraged, or publicly caricatured, are allowed to emit their virulent poison upon all ranks of society without the slightest let or hindrance!  

But it seems that the good Reverend's suggestions fell on deaf ears. Sir Frederic Madden noted in his diary for Friday, 18 September 1835 that he had bought almost three dozen 'flash song books' over the previous two or three years, 'not on account of their obscenity', he explains, 'but on account of the flash and cant words and expressions' they contained, which he deemed it useful to record. 'Saints and Moralists may groan', Madden continues defiantly, 'but I choose to amuse myself thus.'  

Although many moral regulators had sprung up during the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the Society for the Suppression of Vice (founded in 1802) had become a largely benign and ineffectual institution by the time Madden collected his flash songsters.  

Thus, the singing and dissemination of these bawdy songs appear to have been unhindered and the capacity for songs to be learned and transmitted between venues by performers and local and foreign audiences should not be underestimated; nor should the songsters' significance to the annals of nineteenth-century history. Upon publication of Speaight's volume in 1975 one reviewer struggled to find the songs worthy:  

How much more entertaining would have been their evenings if they had done, instead of sung about, what was on their minds. The themes are sexual: women are avid, men are well-endowed and indefatigable. But again the joke and comic euphemism are used to make the fearful bearable, for the lyrics suggest that collectively, if not individually, the singers had deep anxieties about the seemingly unslakeable female sexual appetite and express an intent to reduce women to manageable objects... They are effective evidence that entertainment in the early music halls was supplied by its amateur patrons and that, until professional songwriters and performers established their dominance, the music halls could be rather dreary places.  

Dreary places? We think not. Read on.  

Patrick Spedding and Paul Watt  

Notes  

1. Thanks to Kate Bowan, Mark Carroll, Ed Cray and Derek Scott for their comments on earlier drafts of this general introduction.  

General Introduction


3. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 221.


5. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 190.


7. Ibid., vol. 1, p. 275.

8. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 196.


11. C. Hamm, Putting Popular Music in its Place (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), p. 4. Hamm's introductory chapter is a good overview of the historiography of popular music studies and is a hard-hitting critique of what Hamm sees as the limitations and thwarted narratives of musicology.


17. Speaight, Bawdy Songs, p. 11.
18. Ibid., p. 15.
20. The 'books & manuscripts' – which form only part of this online collection – are indexed at http://www.horntip.com/index.htm [accessed 1 April 2011].
31. Sala, Twice Round the Clock, p. 333.
32. Ibid., pp. 334, 335.
33. Speaight, Bawdy Songs, p. 6.
34. Mayhew, London Labour, vol. 3, pp. 163, 190. The estimated number of 'musicians performing in the streets of London' was 1,000.
35. Ibid., vol. 3, p. 164.
36. The prevalence of German bands in London is noted by Mayhew’s informants who reported that ‘The German bands injure our trade much. They’ll play for half of what we ask’. The informant then goes onto explain that members of German bands live rough and ‘have now possession of the whole coast of Kent and Sussex, and wherever there are watering places’, suggesting the influence of such bands was significant (ibid., vol. 3, p. 163).
37. An example of a foreigner remembering favourably his sojourn at Evans’s was a Dane encountered by George Augustus Sala on a visit he undertook to Copenhagen. See Sala’s Twice Round the Clock, pp. 330–4.
39. See the Journals of Sir Frederic Madden, Bodleian Library MS Eng.hist.C140–82, at MS Eng.hist.C150. We are grateful to Marjorie Caygill for bringing Madden’s collection to our notice.
BAWDY SONGBOOKS OF THE ROMANTIC PERIOD

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Volume 1

Items Published by William West (1834–6)

Edited by
Ed Cray

LONDON
PICKERING & CHATTO
2011