

# The History of Street Music

## ‘Music by handle’ and the Silencing of Street Musicians in the Metropolis

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# The Challenging History of Street Music

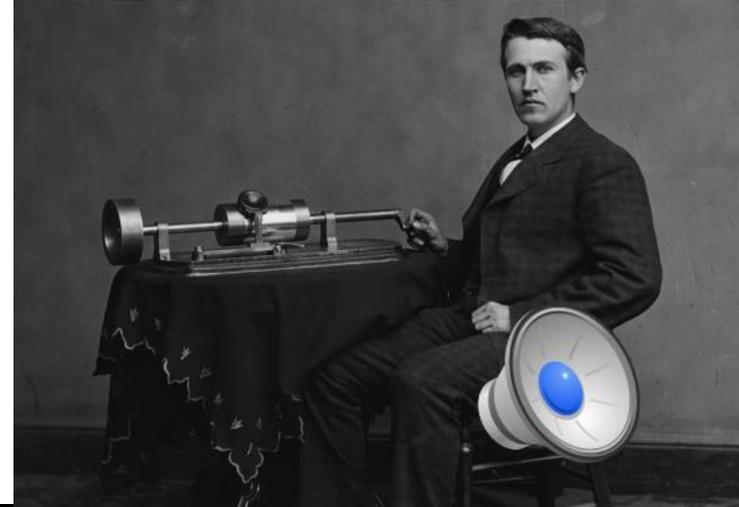
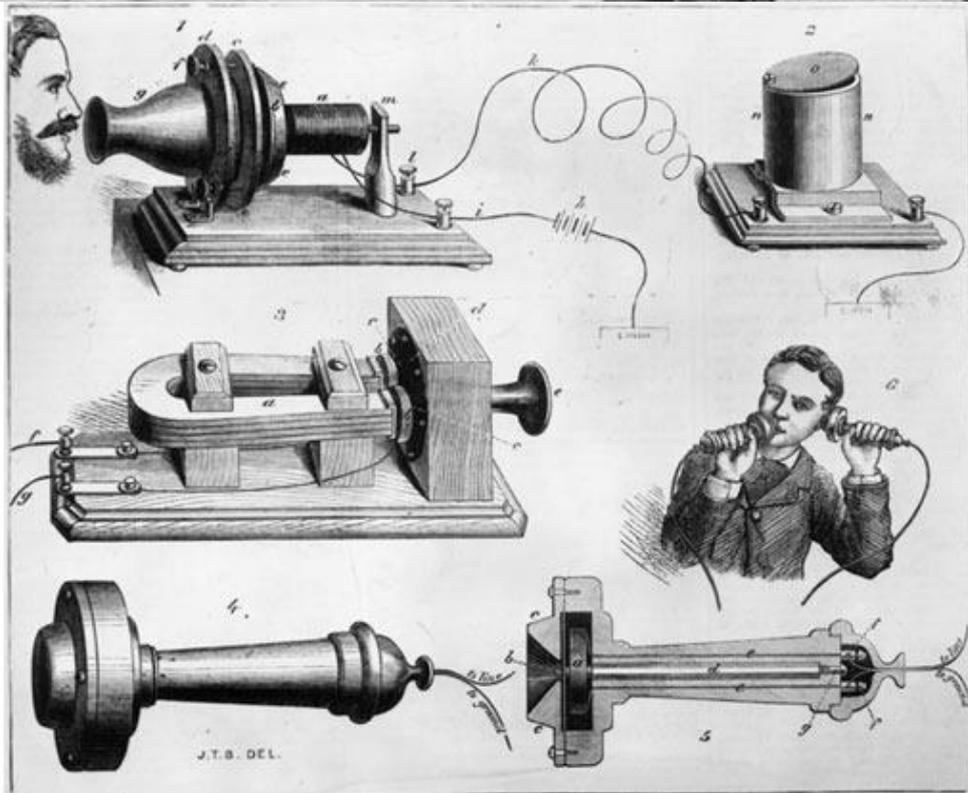
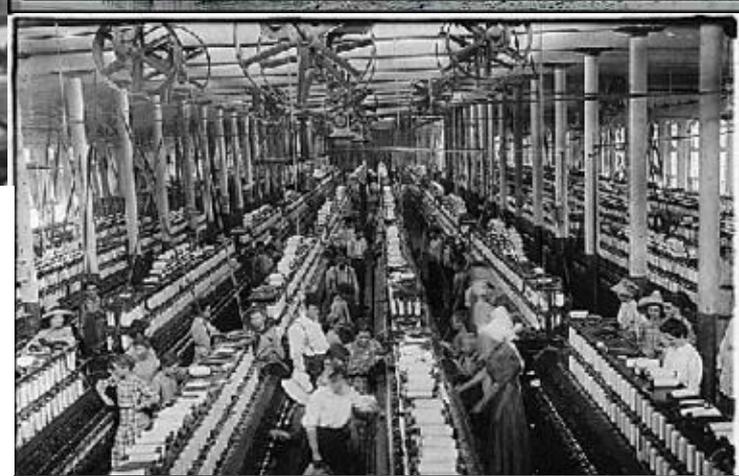
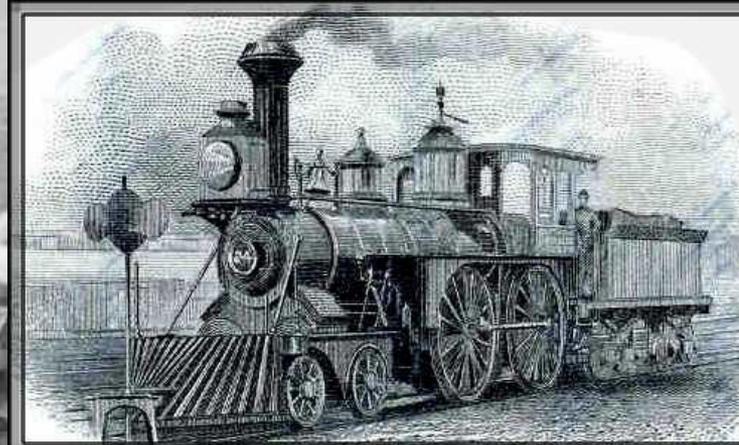
- A ubiquitous feature of the everyday life of many urban environments
    - But has maintained an uncertain position here
  - Patronage and Privileged Performers?
- Or
- ‘Lecherous and irresponsible fly-by-nights’ (Cresswell 2006: 11)?



# A question of sources

- Limited range of sources available that document the history of street performance
- Some records do not give the full picture
- “Much of the history of street performance...is found in the laws that prohibit it” (Harrison-Pepper 1990: 22)
  - Key example: The Victorian Street Music Debates





# Victorian London's changing soundscape

- “a period of unprecedented amplification, unheard of loudness. It was...an age ‘alive with sound’” (Picker 2003: 4)
- “The Industrial Revolution introduced a multitude of new sounds with unhappy consequences for many of the natural and human sounds which they tended to obscure” (Schafer 1977: 71)



# The Street Music Debates

- Origins - 1840s letters in 'The Times'
- Early 1950's and on into the 1960 became particularly attributed to street musicians
- Was a need to “demonstrate what great obstacles are opposed by street music to the progress of art, science, and literature, and what torments are inflicted on the studious, the sensitive, and the afflicted” (Bass 1864: vii).



“Perhaps the pleasantest of all the out-door accessories of a London life are the strains of fugitive music which one hears in the quiet by-streets or suburban highways – strains born of the skill of some of our wandering artists, who, with flute, violin, harp, or brazen tube of various shape and designation, make the brick-walls of the busy city responsive with the echoes of harmony. Many a time and oft have we lingered entranced by the witchery of some street Orpheus, forgetful, not merely of all the troubles of existence, but of existence itself, until the last strain has ceased, and silence aroused us to the matter-of-fact world of business. ... [This] we must pass over with this brief mention upon the present occasion; our business being with their numerous antitheses and would-be rivals – the incarnate nuisances who fill the air with discordant and fragmentary mutilations and distortions of heaven-born melody, to the distraction of educated ears and the perversion of the popular taste.



‘Music by handle’, as it has been facetiously termed, forms our present subject. This kind of harmony, which is not too often deserving of the name, still constitutes...by far the largest portion of the peripatetic minstrelsy of the metropolis. It would appear that these grinders of music...are distinguished from their praiseworthy exemplars, the musicians [just mentioned], by one remarkable, and to them perhaps very comfortable characteristic...they have ears, but no ear, though they would hardly be brought to acknowledge the fact.” (Mamby-Smith 1852)



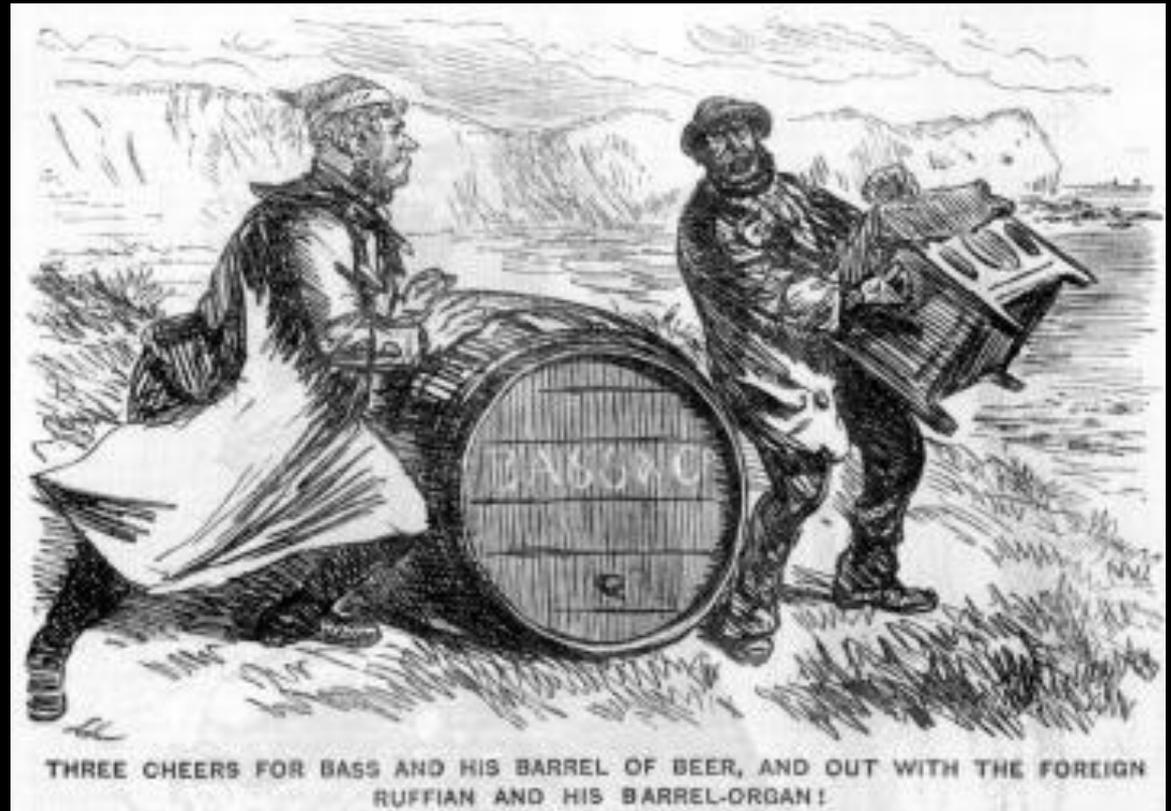
# The Organ Grinder

“The Italian organ grinders [that] came to be seen as the repulsive source of virtually all noise in the city” and suggested that many at the time held the view that “their eradication [was] the task of every ‘Friend of Tranquillity’” (Picker 2003: 43).



# ‘Act for the better regulation of street music in the metropolis’

- ‘Street Music in the Metropolis’
  - Collection of letters, official reports, material from the press, and so on.
- Called for the outright banning of street musicians
  - Nationalism
  - Class
  - Noise



# Nationalism and the Italian Grinder

- ‘Savoyard Fiends’, ‘Blackguards’, Smelled of ‘Garlic and goat-skin’ etc.
- ‘Infest’ the streets which ‘swarmed’ with vagabonds
- Enslaved performers with immoral and exploitative ‘pardrones’



“I conclude...that the reason we all bear it in silence is, that we think that if the law were to step in and abolish street music, a poor, honest, and industrious class would be deprived of the means of living. In this I imagine lies our mistake ... I am convinced that our Legislature could not pass any measure of more genuine humanity and charity than one which would prevent the importation...of those poor Italians into this country. They come, with scarcely any exception, to satisfy the greed of a few large speculators of their own nation. They are badly treated, ill-fed, and, into the bargain, cajoled out of the greater part of their hardly won earnings, before they return to their own homes, which many of them never reach”.



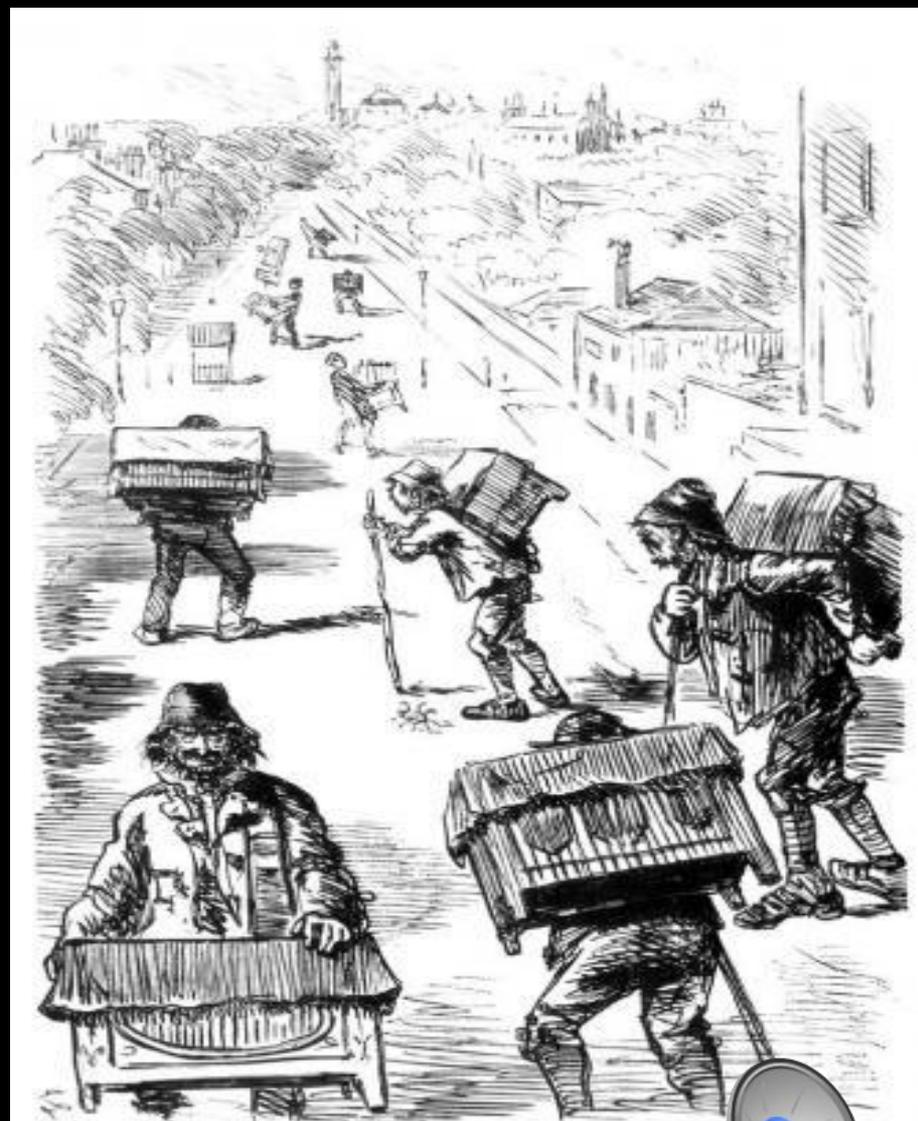


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**ONE GOOD TURN DESERVES ANOTHER.**

THE LAZY ORGAN GRINDERS HAVE HAD IT ALL THEIR OWN WAY WITH THE MONKEYS—NOW  
THEN—CHANGE ABOUT!



SKETCH FROM A STUDY WINDOW,



# Class, Taste, and Street Music

- Bass's collection suggested itself to be speaking on behalf of all classes
- But those included come from a select group
  - Learned professions, scientific men, etc.
- Issue that the 'lower classes' were a source of support for street music
- Key question: who were more important?



# London **LABOUR** & the London **POOR**



HENRY MAYHEW



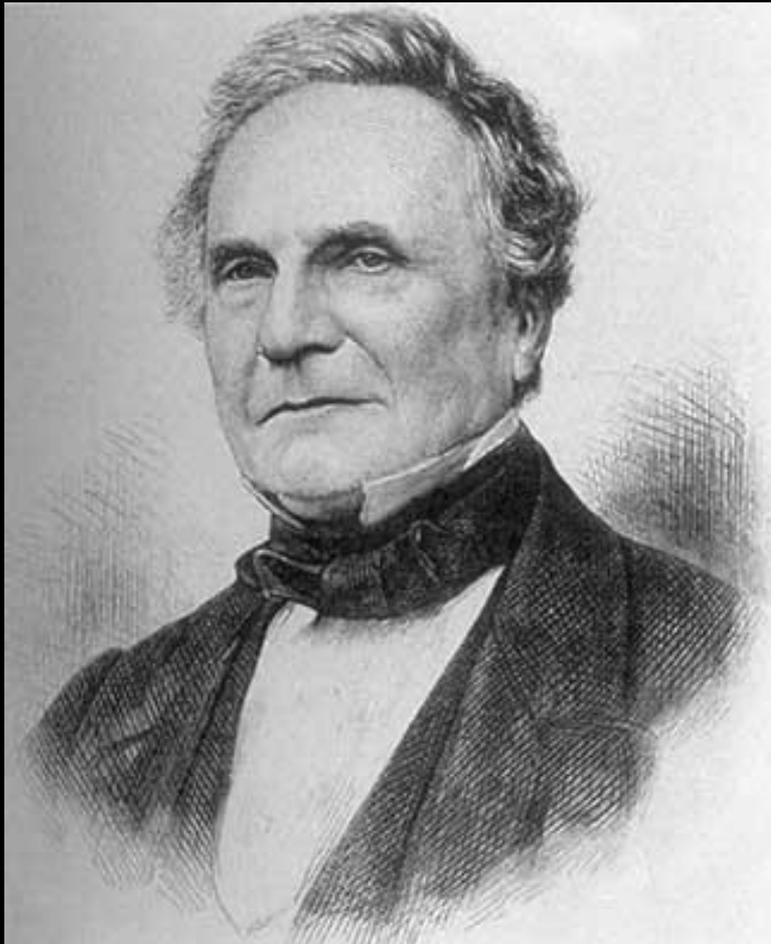
"OLD SARAH," THE WELL-KNOWN HURDY-GURDY



“The piercing notes of a score of shrill fifes, the squall of as many clarions, the hoarse bray of a legion of tin trumpets, the angry and fitful snort of a brigade of rugged bassoons, the unintermitting rattle of a dozen or more deafening drums, the clang of bells firing in peals, the boom of gongs, with the sepulchral roar of some unknown contrivance for bass, so deep that you almost count the vibrations of each note – these are a few of the components of the horse-and-cart organ, the sum total of which is impossible to add up” (Mamby-Smith 1852)



# Babbage's 'Chapter on Street Nuisances'



“I have developed, in my *own* country, an unenviable celebrity, not by anything I have done, but simply by a determined resistance to the tyranny of the lowest mob, whose love, not of music, but of the most discordant noises, is so great that it insists upon enjoying it at all hours in every street”  
(Babbage 1864: 11)



“On a careful retrospect of the last dozen years of my life, I have arrived at the conclusion that...one-fourth part of my working power has been destroyed by the nuisance against which I have protested”

“Twenty-five per cent is rather too large an additional income-tax upon the brain of the intellectual workers of this country, to be levied by permission of the Government, and squandered upon its most worthless classes”

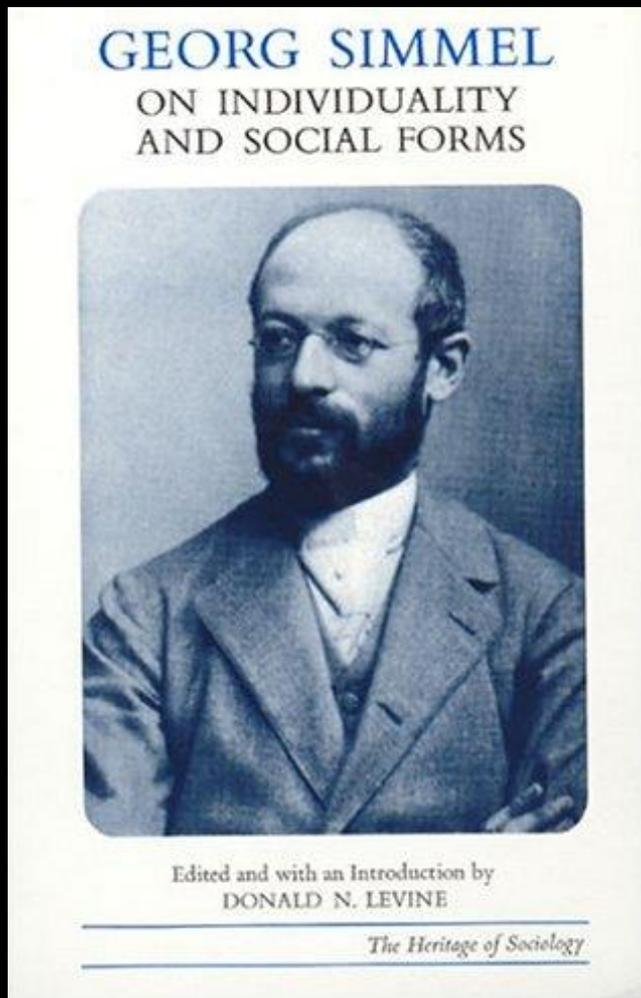
(Babbage 1864: 11)



“To those like myself, in such health as over-worked citizens can be, with the nerves in constant tension, a ‘reasonable cause’ [for requesting the music cease], is tomfoolery. I go home from the City, the brain overwrought, feverish, and fatigued, and I require rest and change of occupation – reading, writing, and music – and these are impossible with the horrible street music from all sides – the very atmosphere impregnated with that thrice cursed droning noise – that abomination of London which makes me ill, which positively shortens my life from the nervous fever it engenders”. (Bass 1864: 8-9)



# Disposition and indifference



- In the context of an over-stimulating urban environment we need to adopt a 'blaze outlook' so as to 'renounce response' to what might annoy us



# No place of escape?

- “In assaulting the hearth, the ... organ grinding denied [them]...the pursuit of ‘rest’ so essential to the life of proper gentlemen” (Picker 2003: 53)
- An invasion into “the very recesses of the ‘Englishman’s castle” (Babbage 1864: 25)



# Conclusion

- What of street music today?
- From the Industrial Revolution to the Electric Revolution
  - From Barrel Organs to Battery powered amps?
- From the Street Music Debates (1860s) to the Metropolitan Police act (1839)



“I was asked by an astute and sarcastic magistrate whether I seriously believed that a man’s brain would be injured by listening to an organ; my reply was, ‘certainly not;’ for the obvious reason that no man having a brain ever listened to street musicians”

(Babbage 1864: 28)

