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Introduction: music and urban history

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Music – as many of the contributors to this special issue of *Urban History* point out – is an important component of the urban experience and can play a significant role in the construction of a civic identity, and yet it is a topic that urban historians have tended to overlook. There are some parallels with the case of the fine arts, to which a special issue of this journal was devoted in 1995, both in the causes for this neglect – which similarly include 'the intimidating traditions of connoisseurship associated with the field'[1] and the difficulty we have with analysing the 'aesthetic experience'[2] – and in the developments which are helping to overcome such inhibitions. So far, the impulse seems to be coming from musicologists and music historians, who, inhabiting a fairly small corner of the academic field, are fully conscious of the need to forge connections with other disciplines and historiographical traditions. The importance of contextualizing and historicizing not only the composition but also the production, transmission and reception of music has been recognized for some time, but so far urban historians have not responded as perhaps the music historians thought they might to the insights and openings that a musical 'new historicism' seems to offer. But there is clearly an opportunity – indeed, a pressing need – to develop a broadly-based cultural history of towns and cities in which music will take its place. The aim of this special issue is to promote that objective by illustrating the state of the art and suggesting some of the ideas, tools and methodologies with which it might be developed in future.

The proposal for a special issue of *Urban History*, which would deliver these arguments and ideas into the hands of urban historians, originated with Fiona Kisby, recent editor of *Music and Musicians in Renaissance Cities and Towns*,[3] and contributor of a bibliographical essay to this issue. Our intention has been to provide a range of different kinds of contribution, including several short articles focusing on results and conclusions (often quite close to the doctoral research on which they are based), a report on a substantial ongoing AHRB-funded research project, a reflection on methodological approaches ('Models for an urban musicology'), and a bibliographical survey. The research articles themselves consider

[1] S. Nenadic, 'Introduction: art and the city', *Urban History*, 22 (1995), 176.
[2] See below, F. Kisby, 'Music in European cities and towns', 82.
[3] F. Kisby (ed.), *Music and Musicians in Renaissance Cities and Towns* (Cambridge, 2001).

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'urban music' from a number of different angles: the impact of an institutional musical establishment on its host city, the place of 'bad' music in urban aural culture, the use of public music to articulate the social and political occasions of an urban community, and the politics of commercial music performance in the metropolis. Most (though not all) of the authors would describe themselves as music historians or musicologists, and we invited a response from an urban historian, Peter Borsay, as a complement to their perspectives. The contributors to this issue met to present and discuss their preliminary papers at a small colloquium in September 2000 at Royal Holloway, University of London, under the auspices of the AHRB project 'Church Music in English Towns, 1450–1550', and have subsequently developed their contributions with the knowledge of the context in which they would be presented.

The selection of articles and contributions for this special issue leans strongly to the late medieval and early modern. This certainly reflects the interests and contacts of the editors in putting together the volume, but it also results from our wish to show how enriching the interconnections and cross-references within a fairly closely concentrated group of papers can be. Research agendas are framed in the light of methodological debate, while the presentation of their findings both acknowledges and augments the historiography and bibliography of the subject. There is some commonality of source material, in type if not in exact identity, from medieval Laon to *ancien régime* Jaca, and researchers working in different places but within one general cultural time-frame encounter many similar problems. But concentrating on the medieval and early modern in this way also raises the questions whether this is in fact an exceptionally fruitful or promising period on which to focus, and whether a similar approach would work so well for other periods. The former question is difficult to settle at this stage; the latter is in part answered by Derek Scott's contribution on the politics and economics of the nineteenth-century London music hall, and it is easy to imagine a range of papers that discussed the sorts of topics treated here – institutional music, 'bad' music, public music – in the modern period, backed by a discussion of methodology and bibliography.[4] At the same time, however, Scott's paper reminds us that historians of different periods – whether their subject is music or some other cultural or political phenomenon – may well have quite different sets of assumptions about the urban entity, and different vocabularies and theoretical tools with which to discuss it. While there may be a broad agenda for urban history, its dominant concerns vary considerably over historical periods. Notions of leisure, commodity, commercialized entertainment, and an opposition between 'bourgeois values' and popular culture, enter the discourse of historians somewhere between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries,

[4] Cf. M. Daunton (ed.), *Cambridge Urban History of Britain*, vol. III (Cambridge, 2000), 751, 761–2, 777–8, 780–1.

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and strongly influence explanations of the place and importance of music in social and cultural interactions. Incorporating music into our assessment of the urban experience, while it promises rewards in any period, will not lead to identical outcomes across the historical spectrum. In fact, it should remind us that music is itself a variable, historically and contextually shaped, both by contemporaries and by ourselves.

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