

“Loud and Open Speaking in ‘the People’s’ Mighty Name”: Eliza Cook, Music and Politics

Susan Rutherford 

Abstract In 1849, the working-class poet Eliza Cook (1818–89) expanded her international profile by venturing into weekly periodical publication with *Eliza Cook’s Journal*. Not only was this the first British journal named after a female editor but it also placed an unusual emphasis on music—unusual not least because few women in that epoch were given the opportunity to participate in the broader critical discourses on music. Cook’s poetry was already widely disseminated through various musical settings by composers from William Balfe to Henry Russell; in her new journal, music further emerged as central to her philosophy of liberation for all. Placing street musicians alongside opera and salon concerts in an exhibition of remarkably eclectic taste, Cook saw the propensity for music making in all layers of society. She regarded musical culture as a soundscape of experience, emotion, and agency to which she, and all those from the laboring classes, not only had a right to access, engage in, and share but was part of their own innate being. Music symbolized imagination, freedom from the mundane, and limitless human potential. Efforts to secure music for “the people” were thus indissolubly linked to broader political rights for suffrage and equality.

Music, politics—and women? The juxtaposition of those terms was something of a conundrum in nineteenth-century Britain. For women, both politics and music posed serious issues of access and agency. The new definition of the voter as explicitly a “male person” in the 1832 Reform Act denied female entry into the politics of government more conclusively than before.¹ Women’s political activism was restricted to participation in pressure groups, single-issue campaigns, and philanthropic ventures.² Unsurprisingly, the scholarship documenting their efforts rarely mentions music. Many of the most politically active women were Quakers and therefore averse to music making on principle.³ Moreover, women’s musical activity was confined within strict,

Susan Rutherford is honorary professor of music at the University of Cambridge and emerita professor of music at the University of Manchester. She thanks David Kennerley and Oskar Cox Jensen for their support and guidance in the writing of this article, which arose from research generously funded by a Leverhulme Trust Major Research Fellowship: “A History of Voices: Singing in Britain from 1690 to the Present (2016–19).” Please direct any correspondence to susan.rutherford@manchester.ac.uk.

¹ Sarah Richardson, *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Abingdon, 2013), 191.

² Krista Cowman, *Women in British Politics, c.1689–1979* (Basingstoke, 2010), 30–39; Richardson, *Political Worlds of Women*, 8.

³ Thomas Clarkson, *A Portraiture of Quakerism: Taken from a View of the Education and Discipline, Social Manners, Civil and Political Economy, Religious Principles and Character, of the Society of Friends*, 3 vols. (New York, 1806), 1:64–79.

even contradictory contexts. Music featured in female education as one of middle-class femininity's vaunted accomplishments, designed to sweeten cloistered domesticity and aid the marriage market; conversely, female opera singers were the most visible and independent women in public life, actively pursuing highly paid careers.⁴ In both private and public spheres, though, women were primarily restricted to the roles of performer (voice, piano, harp, or guitar) or teacher rather than composer, orchestral player, or critic. Although admitted to the Royal Academy of Music from its opening in 1824, by 1841 women constituted just 6.8 percent (272) of all professional musicians, although almost a quarter of all music teachers.⁵ For a woman to use music consciously in order to further her politics therefore required confronting not just one but two sets of formidable obstacles.

The efforts of the few women who did so have mostly lain unrecorded by historians. One overlooked example is the poet and journalist Eliza Cook, viewed in her own time as a "genius" by some⁶ and a "red-hot radical" by others,⁷ but by succeeding generations as merely a faded, even risible purveyor of Victorian sentiment.⁸ More recently, Cook has provoked new critical interest for her working-class origins, association with liberal politics, apparent preference for same-sex relationships, and celebrity status.⁹ What has so far escaped notice is that threading through her philosophy of liberation for all was music. Music as both subject and stylistic influence was part of Cook's craft as a writer, an expression of her personal life, and a profound element in her desire to change society for the better. Her observations about music provide a rare instance of a female voice commenting on such matters from a lower-class background and reveal the workings of music as politics as well as the politics of music: who listened to what and when, who made music and why.

⁴ Susan Rutherford, *The Prima Donna and Opera, 1815–1930* (Cambridge, 2006).

⁵ Deborah Rohr, "Women and the Music Profession in Victorian England: The Royal Society of Female Musicians, 1839–1866," *Journal of Musicological Research* 18, no. 4 (1999): 307–46, at 310–11. As David Kennerley points out, underreporting is surely a factor here given that the 1841 census did not record the occupations of married women: David Kennerley, "Professionalisation and the Female Musician in Early-Victorian Britain: The Campaign for Eliza Salmon," in *The Music Profession in Britain, 1780–1920: New Perspectives on Status and Identity*, ed. Rosemary Golding (Abingdon, 2018), 53–71, at 57.

⁶ For example, see Lord Palmerston's reference to Cook's "original genius and unusual strength of thought"; letter from Cook to unknown recipient, 17 June 1864, MsL C771, University of Iowa Special Collections.

⁷ John Ross Dix, *Lions: Living and Dead; or Personal Recollections of the Great and Gifted* (London, 1852), 52.

⁸ Alexis Easley, "Victorian Iconoclast: Eliza Cook (1812–1889)," in *Celebrity Authorship and Afterlives in English and American Literature*, ed. Gaston Franssen and Rick Honings (Basingstoke, 2016), 88–121, at 88–89.

⁹ Solveig C. Robinson, "Of 'Haymakers' and 'City Artisans': The Chartist Poetics of Eliza Cook's Songs of Labor," *Victorian Poetry* 39, no. 2 (2001): 229–53; Johanna M. Smith, "Textual Encounters in *Eliza Cook's Journal*: Class, Gender, and Sexuality," in *Encounters in the Victorian Press: Editors, Authors, Readers*, ed. Laurel Brake and Julie F. Codell (Basingstoke, 2005), 50–68; Florence S. Boos, ed., *Working-Class Women Poets in Victorian Britain: An Anthology* (Peterborough, 2008); Shu-chuan Yan, "When Common Voices Speak": Labour, Poetry and Eliza Cook," *Women's Writing* 22, no. 4 (2014): 428–54.

ELIZA COOK

Helen Rogers points out that in the nineteenth century “women were rarely recognized as political agents in their own right, capable of speaking on behalf of themselves or for ‘the People’ as a whole.” In order to do so, women had “to develop alternative modes of political identification and definitions, especially of ‘woman’ and of ‘the People.’”¹⁰ Eliza Cook evinced just such a nuanced perspective. In the preface to her 1845 volume of poetry, she stressed that the “People” were not “they” but “we”: “I remember seeing a review of my earliest writings where the critic attempted to sneer me down as being ‘a poet of and for the lower classes.’ Short-sighted men of letters! Did he dream of the compliment he paid me?”¹¹ Indeed, Cook takes pleasure in finding herself in the company of other “poor insignificant varlets” such as Robert Burns, Alan Cunningham, Robert Bloomfield, Shakespeare, Milton, and Chaucer.¹²

Cook’s concept of “the People” thus included artists as well as artisans; she saw herself as belonging to both groups. Born in London in 1812, she was the daughter of a tin-plate worker and youngest of eleven children.¹³ Part of her childhood was spent on a farm near Horsham, Sussex, initiating an encounter with nature that would infuse her poetry. A similarly influential but more traumatic event was the death of her mother. In 1835, Cook published her first volume of poetry;¹⁴ unusually for a self-educated woman, she also obtained a position as a governess or companion to the granddaughter of James Harmer, a former barrister known for his liberal sympathies and now the wealthy proprietor of the *Weekly Dispatch*.¹⁵ Cook began publishing her poetry in that newspaper in 1836, soon acquiring a national and then international reputation. The political tenor of her writing was underlined by her role between 1839 and 1845 as the foremost female poet published in the Chartist newspaper the *Northern Star*¹⁶—a relationship that eventually foundered in the growing discord between Harmer and the *Northern Star*’s more radical editor, Feargus O’Connor. In 1849, Cook successfully established her own weekly periodical, *Eliza Cook’s Journal*; its closure in 1854 was attributed to her encroaching ill health. Awarded an annual pension of £100 from the civil list in 1864,¹⁷ she passed the last thirty-five years of her life in relative seclusion until her death in 1889.

Cook’s notions of class were shaped by contact with the binary oppositions of urban/rural, poverty/wealth, and artisan/artist. Her understanding of “women” was similarly broad and dismissive of gendered criticism: “I have been told that I write too boldly—that a feminine pen should never have traced such songs as ‘The

¹⁰ Helen Rogers, *Women and the People: Authority, Authorship and the Radical Tradition in Nineteenth-Century England* (Aldershot, 2000), 7.

¹¹ Eliza Cook, *Poems: Second Series* (London, 1845), vi.

¹² Cook, *Poems*, vii.

¹³ See “Notable Living Women and Their Deeds,” *Beeton’s Young Englishwoman* (London, 1875), 615–19 (bound edition of the periodical first published by Samuel Beeton and his wife, Isabella, in 1864); “Miss Eliza Cook,” *Illustrated Review* 2, no. 25 (1871): 225–28. A modern biography is much needed.

¹⁴ Eliza Cook, *Lays of a Wild Harp: A Collection of Metrical Pieces* (London, 1835).

¹⁵ Allyson N. May, *The Bar and the Old Bailey, 1750–1850* (Chapel Hill, 2003), 186–87.

¹⁶ Fabienne Moine, “The Politics of Objects: Eliza Cook’s Biographies of Things,” *Cahiers victoriens et édouardiens* 83 (2016), online only, <https://journals.openedition.org/cve/2620>. On Chartist poetry and the *Northern Star*, see Michael Sanders, *The Poetry of Chartism: Aesthetics, Politics, History* (Cambridge, 2009).

¹⁷ Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets*, 281–82.

Englishman' and 'Old Time'. May I presume to ask those cavillers *why* I should never have written them?"¹⁸ Not all descriptions of her style as "masculine" were intended negatively. In 1848, Frederic Rowton praised her "plain, and terse, and energetic, and muscular" poetry, which proved that "there is no sexuality in soul": "It might have all been written by a man; and not better written either."¹⁹ Cook herself rejected narrow definitions of femininity, terming herself as a "wild colt" that had acquired "the rough coat, and honest, though unpretending qualities of an 'Old Dobbin.'"²⁰ To her contemporaries, she was an oddity: shy in person, direct and forthright in print, ebullient yet abrasive in her private correspondence. She sported an unconventional image, with short hair coiffed into ringlets and a mannish style of dress.²¹ She never married. In 1838, she told the American poet Frances Osgood she had rejected a proposal;²² in 1844, again to Osgood, she declared, "I am not married (what an awful word that is) somehow I think an old recollection skulks about my heart, and this is a vast stumbling block to an 'advantageous match.'" The idea of selling herself "like other common and gross merchandise" only to "dream" of "one cherished but forbidden image" was repellent. Instead, she counseled herself, "be careful Lizzy Cook and do not make a victim and a fool of yourself at the same time."²³ Was that "forbidden image" male or female? A year later, Cook met the American actor Charlotte Cushman and over the following years publicly declared her devotion in a series of impassioned poems.²⁴ The extent of their relationship is unclear, given Cushman's ongoing affair with the writer Matilda Hays (among others), but Cook's poetry suggests that no person other than her mother held such a place in her affections.

What kind of agency might Cook's refiguring of ideas of womanhood and class have enabled with relation to music? One explanation might draw on Michael Sanders's description of the "two distinct levels of political agency" displayed by Chartist poetry. The first exhibits "discrete interventions in specific political debates"; in the second, "political agency arises directly out of poetry's creative capacities; its ability to imagine things differently."²⁵ In her poetry, prose writing, and compositions, Cook arguably imagined a different world that acted as a metaphor for political liberalism: one in which diverse musics were engaged with on equal terms, where all had access to developing musical skill, and where women could contribute freely to discourses on music.

¹⁸ Cook, *Poems*, vii.

¹⁹ Frederic Rowton, *The Female Poets of Britain* (1848; repr. London, 1856), 480–95, at 480.

²⁰ Cook, *Poems*, viii.

²¹ Cook expressed surprise at being represented as "a huge, masculine sort of female prizefighter," given that she was only five foot three inches with "positively non-imposing" features. "Darlings," *Eliza Cook's Journal* [hereafter *ECJ*], 26 March 1853, 337–39, at 339.

²² Letter from Eliza Cook to Frances Sargent Osgood, 16 October 1838, cited in Boos, *Working-Class Women Poets*, 296–97.

²³ Letter from Eliza Cook to Frances Sargent Osgood, 25 February 1844, Rufus W. Griswold Papers, 1834–1857, Massachusetts Collections Online, accessed 29 September 2019, www.digitalcommonwealth.org/search/commonwealth:6h443q06q.

²⁴ Alexis Easley, "Researching Gender Issues: Eliza Cook, Charlotte Cushman, and Transatlantic Celebrity, 1845–54," in *Researching the Nineteenth-Century Periodical Press: Case Studies*, ed. Alexis Easley, Andrew King, and John Morton (London, 2018), 30–45; Lisa Merrill, *When Romeo Was a Woman: Charlotte Cushman and Her Circle of Female Spectators* (Ann Arbor, 1999), 141–50.

²⁵ Sanders, *Poetry of Chartism*, 13.

ELIZA COOK AND MUSIC

The title of Cook's first volume, *Lays of a Wild Harp*, speaks to the place that music inhabited in her idea of poetry. Poetry as an act of music making was a common trope among nineteenth-century poets, harking back to ancient Greece. Music, as Pierre Dubois has shown, had moreover long been given emphasis in female authorship of fiction and poetry, as an index of "feminine sensibilities."²⁶ Where Cook differed was in her association between music and independence: it was, after all, a "wild harp" to which she laid claim. For her, music was a property of nature, heard in the caroling of birds or the whistling of the wind. Such were the "voices of the Free," models of a recurring political ideal in her poetry. But music also represented mysticism, devotion, and inspiration, furnishing spiritual riches in place of the "ducat's chink" of wealth.²⁷

Paradoxically, music was one of the means by which Cook gained financial independence. Her poems not only spoke of music—they became music. Around eighty settings of her work by various composers between 1837 and 1860 have been traced to date; the actual number is probably higher. The list includes established classical composers, such as Michael William Balfe, Vincent Wallace, and Edward Loder; lesser names, such as Nathan James Sporle and Stephen Glover; and a relative newcomer, the baritone Henry Russell, then developing an enthusiastic following on both sides of the Atlantic.²⁸ Russell set around twenty-nine of Cook's poems to music, including "The Old Arm-Chair" (Cook's paean to the chair once belonging to her mother), supposedly the most popular song in the United States in the 1840s.²⁹

Cook's darker, edgier poems—at least those relating to British politics—did not, however, find musical adaptation. One example was "A Song, to 'The People' of England." Printed in the *London Journal* on 3 June 1848, as the city simmered with tension as Chartists and Irish Confederates united in response to John Mitchel's recent conviction of treason in Dublin,³⁰ the poem urged steadfast adherence to the cause, yet stressed that liberty would be achieved:

Not with weapons red and reeking,
Not with Anarchy's wild flame;
But with loud and open speaking,
In "the People's" mighty name!³¹

Those last two lines declared Cook's own path. A year later, she founded *Eliza Cook's Journal*, the first periodical titled after a female editor. Costing three halfpence, it swiftly established an impressive circulation of between fifty thousand and sixty thousand readers with its mix of articles on social and political issues, travel items, biographies of radicals such as William Lovett and Richard Cobden, short stories, and poetry.³²

²⁶ Pierre Dubois, *Music in the Georgian Novel* (Cambridge, 2015), 198.

²⁷ Cook, "Wealth," *Poems*, 22.

²⁸ Andrew Lamb, *A Life on the Ocean Wave: The Story of Henry Russell* (Croydon, 2007).

²⁹ Easley, "Victorian Iconoclast," 94.

³⁰ Malcolm Chase, *Chartism: A New History* (Manchester, 2007), 318–20.

³¹ Eliza Cook, "A Song, to 'The People' of England," *London Journal*, 3 June 1848, 198.

³² Smith, "Textual Encounters," 51–52.

Cook introduced herself to her readers in the first edition on 5 May 1849. Distancing herself from the figures of both a mission-driven “mental Joan of Arc” and a moralizing “Mrs Trimmer,” she declared her rejection of the patronizing imposition of standards from above: “I have a distaste for the fashion so violently adopted of talking to ‘the people’, as though they needed an army of self-sacrificing champions to do battle for them, and rescue them from the ‘Slough of Despond.’”³³ Although her denial of class championship or an educational goal was disingenuous, Cook’s approach proved subtly different from much Victorian philanthropy: both revelatory in its attempt to position the laboring classes as removed from the image of dumb, brutish masses,³⁴ and territorial by laying claim to the cultural domains of the arts and sciences.

MUSIC AND ELIZA COOK’S JOURNAL

From its inception, *Eliza Cook’s Journal* offered various encounters with music, through articles on historical or contemporary topics, biographical items on musicians, short stories, and poems. Most items were unsigned and could have been written by any of the journalists contributing to the periodical, including Eliza Meteyard, Anna Maria Sergeant, Jessie Mario White, Julia Kavanagh, Percy St. John, William Dalton, Charles Hardwick, and Samuel Smiles. Smiles, who wrote some five hundred articles in all, specialized in “biographical items”³⁵ and possibly authored those on musicians. These accounts were of unexceptional content, dealing with opera singers (Angelica Catalani, Henrietta Sontag, Maria Malibran); instrumentalists (Liszt, Paganini); and composers (Mozart, Beethoven, Rossini), including, less conventionally, an item on the Yorkshire working-class composer William Jackson.³⁶ Most such articles charted a trajectory from poverty and hardship to fame, illustrating music’s supposedly transformative power.

That notion similarly infuses the journal’s short stories. The heroine of “The Singing Girl” (unsigned) exchanges a future working in the factory for a career as a classical soprano;³⁷ “The History of an Old Song” (by A. A.) depicts the role of a ballad in alleviating the fortunes of the poor and dispossessed.³⁸ But music’s agency could extend beyond the individual to the collective. The story offers a familiar (mis)quotation: “‘Give me the making of a people’s ballads,’ said a great man, ‘I care not who frames their laws.’”³⁹ That maxim occasions the story’s final sentences:

³³ Eliza Cook, “A Word to My Readers,” *ECJ*, 5 May 1849, 1.

³⁴ Thomas Carlyle described the “under classes” as “these wild inarticulate souls, struggling there, with inarticulate uproar, like dumb creatures in pain, unable to speak what is in them!” Thomas Carlyle, *Charitism* (London, 1840), 6.

³⁵ Samuel Smiles, *Autobiography* (London, 1905), 164–65; T. Travers, “The Problem of Identification of Articles: Samuel Smiles and *Eliza Cook’s Journal*, 1849–1854,” *Victorian Periodicals Newsletter* 6, no. 2 (1973): 41–45.

³⁶ “William Jackson, the Musical Composer,” *ECJ*, 20 March 1850, 324–25.

³⁷ “The Singing Girl,” *ECJ*, 9 March 1850, 289–91.

³⁸ A. A., “The History of an Old Song,” *ECJ*, 29 September 1849, 342–45.

³⁹ A. A., “History of an Old Song,” 345. See the original: “If a man were permitted to make all the Ballads, he need not care who should make the Laws of a Nation.” Andrew Fletcher, *An Account of a Conversation concerning a Right Regulation of Governments for the Common Good of Mankind* (Edinburgh, 1704), 10.

“the ‘people’s ballad’ legislates for no class or colour, but for all! Such is the value of an ‘old song.’”⁴⁰ This emphasis on the reputed potential of music’s marriage with words in shaping society would become a recurring theme.

The journal’s writings about music appeared during a noted period of democratization of classical music. Since 1839, various steps had been taken by the government to include music within school education,⁴¹ while the initiation of the singing-class movement by John Hullah and Joseph Mainzer provided new opportunities for working-class adults to participate in making music.⁴² These developments were part of the reclaiming of cultural territory occasioned by the social upheaval of the “Hungry Forties”; conversely, music was considered a useful tool for schooling and tempering the behavior of the laboring classes.⁴³ The tensions between such arguments also surface in *Eliza Cook’s Journal*. One example is an item, “Amusement,” in October 1849.⁴⁴ Although unattributed, it was almost certainly the work of Smiles, reproducing material from his article for the *People’s Journal* in 1846.⁴⁵ His focus was on rational entertainment. Instead of “a dog-fight” or the lure of alcohol, Smiles advised exercise, free access to museums, and, above all, music with its capacity to provide “a means of solace even in the poorest dwellings.” But this was not all that music could supposedly do. In line with his own philosophy of “self-help,” Smiles cited the Unitarian preacher William Channing: “Music has a most favourable bearing on public morals.” Smiles elaborated on such views, explaining how singing classes formed part of the temperance movement in Ireland in order “to refine the taste, soften the manners, and humanize the mass of the people.”⁴⁶ These were precisely the ideas that dominated so many Victorian discussions on the topic of music and that would be reiterated by Smiles on other occasions in the journal.

Cook herself exhibited a more equivocal stance. A fortnight later, she made her first intervention into discourses on music with “Old Tunes” (3 November 1849):

We love music dearly: love it with a deep and fervent adoration that amounts, we suspect, to a “blind idolatry;” for though the warm impulses of our soul are ever ready to rush into sublime ecstasy at the sound of “Handel’s Coronation Anthem,” they betray an equal susceptibility at the jingling of “Fisher’s Hornpipe” on a

⁴⁰ A. A., “History of an Old Song,” 345.

⁴¹ Bernarr Rainbow, “The Rise of Popular Music Education in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Victorian Studies* 30, no. 1 (1986): 25–49.

⁴² Dave Russell, *Popular Music in England, 1840–1914: A Social History* (Manchester, 1997), 29–32; Howard E. Smither, *A History of the Oratorio*, vol. 4, *The Oratorio in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (Chapel Hill, 2000), 269–76.

⁴³ Singing “may be truly regarded as a valuable agent in awakening within us high principles of action, and in fostering noble sentiments.” Joseph Mainzer, *Singing for the Million* (1841; repr., London, 1842), xiii–xiv.

⁴⁴ “Amusement,” *ECJ*, 20 October 1849, 385–86.

⁴⁵ Samuel Smiles, “What Is Doing for the People in Public Amusement and Recreation,” *People’s Journal* 2, no. 27 (1846): 13–14. In the existing scholarship on Cook, articles written by Smiles (such as his “levelling-up” notion, “Levelling Up,” *ECJ*, 29 April 1854, 13–14) are often wrongly attributed to Cook. Her own “voice” in her signed articles and those clearly authored by her exhibit much less moralistic and didactic tendencies.

⁴⁶ “Amusement,” 386.

demi-piano, with which a little Italian boy occasionally refreshes our narrow street. Nay, we even plead guilty to being touched by the mouth-organ and drum that, time out of mind, have drowned the groans of the dying in the matrimonial battle-field of Punch and Judy.⁴⁷

Here is Cook's inclusive philosophy in a nutshell, celebrating music *as* music rather than as a device to school the population. The suggestion that music possessed an innate value rather than operating merely as "an object of social utility and balm" was, as Dave Russell has shown, still a "minority" view as late as 1907.⁴⁸ Moreover, Cook inverted the hierarchy of elite music over the popular: "So we have discovered, to our great satisfaction, that the drum and mouth-organ hold the same primitive influence over the darlings of a duke as over the plagues of a pauper." And while appreciative of all kinds of music, she admitted to a "lurking affection" for one genre in particular: the "sacred witchery" of "our grandmothers' jig-tunes, and our grandmothers' fireside ditties." Thus "Casta Diva" (from Bellini's *Norma*) left her unmoved, unlike "the simple pathos of 'John Anderson my Jo,' or 'Poor Mary Anne' . . . Yes! Goth-like as it may appear, we confess our passion for all the vulgar, common-place tunes extant, be they English, Irish, or Scotch." These were the tunes, she suggested, that occasioned spontaneous dancing when played in the street, or were sung as lullabies to infants, or poignantly acted as "the strongest links which hold us to the dead."⁴⁹ (Keen-eyed readers might have noted that a recent poem, "An Old Tune," had described how Cushman's singing of "Jock o' Hazeldean" reminded Cook of her mother.⁵⁰)

Seemingly unremarkable, this slender article was nonetheless highly unusual. If women gave special consideration to music in their fictional writing, it may be because they had few other outlets to voice their views publicly on the topic. Women occasionally translated the works of male composers (Mary Cowden-Clarke), compiled the memoirs of other musicians (Frances Burney), or even wrote teaching materials for student musicians (Sarah Glover and Harriet Wainwright).⁵¹ But few women openly entered broader discourses about music. Perhaps the first such instance was Harriet Martineau's essay in *How to Observe: Morals and Manners* (1838), on why popular song's revelation of a particular culture should interest the astute traveler.⁵² A handful of female journalists were active in music periodicals but generally invisible. Richard Mackenzie Bacon, editor of the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* from 1818 to 1828, was assisted by his daughters Louisa Barwell and Mary Anne Bacon: neither was ever named in the periodical.⁵³ William Jerdan, editor of the *Literary Gazette* from 1817 to 1850,

⁴⁷ "Old Tunes," *ECJ*, 3 November 1849, 1–2.

⁴⁸ Russell, *Popular Music*, 23.

⁴⁹ "Old Tunes," 1.

⁵⁰ Eliza Cook, "An Old Tune: to C. C.," *Poems by Eliza Cook*, 3 vols. (London, 1849), 3:33–36.

⁵¹ Mary Cowden Clarke translated Luigi Cherubini's *A Treatise on Counterpoint and Fugue* (London, 1854) and Hector Berlioz's *A Treatise on Modern Instrumentation and Orchestration* (London, 1856); Frances Burney, ed. *Memoirs of Doctor Burney* (London, 1832); Sarah Glover, *Scheme for Rendering Psalmody Congregational* (Norwich, 1835); Harriet Stewart Wainwright, *Critical Remarks on the Art of Singing* (London, 1836).

⁵² Harriet Martineau, *How to Observe: Morals and Manners* (London, 1838), 132–37.

⁵³ Grove Music Online, s.v., "Bacon, Richard Mackenzie," by Leanne Langley, accessed 27 September 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.01725>.

sometimes used a Miss Wilkinson, an organist, as a “musical critic,” but her articles, unsigned, are impossible to identify.⁵⁴ Elizabeth Rigby (Lady Eastlake) contributed a lengthy philosophical piece on music to the *Quarterly Review* in 1848, again published anonymously.⁵⁵ Eliza Cook, not only writing unashamedly as herself about music in the popular press but also defying ideas of feminine propriety in order to embrace “vulgar” music, was doing something quietly extraordinary.

Cook contributed two other articles on music over the years. The first, “The ‘House of Lords,’ and the ‘House of Commons,’” compared the audience of Beethoven’s *Fidelio* (given in Italian with the original spoken dialogue set to recitative) at Her Majesty’s Theatre with that of Shakespeare’s *Timon of Athens* at Sadler’s Wells. The former event was part of a special season arranged at “playhouse prices” following the usual subscription nights. The theater’s impresario, Benjamin Lumley, described it as an “innovation” motivated by the Great Exhibition, the influx of tourists, and the railway but also by the “greater diffusion of musical education,” which had “forced the great musical establishments to relax their traditional barriers of exclusiveness” and open their doors to a wider public.⁵⁶ Lumley viewed the experiment as both artistically and financially successful. Cook was less convinced. She found “a tolerably full house, the greater portion of the number evidently being unaccustomed to the Opera,” as revealed by the eccentric attire of some older female spectators, anxious to dress appropriately for opera-going. Other signs of that sense of unfamiliarity were evident. Despite the singing of the much-admired German soprano Sophie Cruvelli, the audience was either restless or made soporific by the “heavy” music with its extensive recitatives. As her own companion fell asleep, Cook concluded, “‘Grand Opera’ is not the thing for people who have not been schooled in it.”⁵⁷

Yet at *Timon of Athens*, the audience was raptly intent: “It was pleasant to see the artizan [*sic*] class, with grimed shirt-sleeves turned up to the elbow, dirty fustian jackets, butcher’s caps, and coalheaver’s flaps, all quietly absorbed in a classical, dry play,” while the women appeared unselfconsciously in “battered bonnet and tattered shawl.” Cook was struck by the “contrast” between “the vivid interest and voluntary attention bestowed by an artizan class on this dry play, with the vapid ‘dead and alive’ endurance of a ‘Grand Opera’ at Her Majesty’s Theatre by the rich and enlightened.”⁵⁸ Culture, in short, could be enjoyed just as much by the poor as by the wealthy, if not more so, providing there were no artificial barriers to understanding.

Cook’s third major article on music further set out to demonstrate that appreciation of music was not “testified by execution on ivory keys and mystic strings,” instruments available only to the prosperous:

The dirty, shoeless urchin in the courts of St Giles’s never heard of a “gamut,” and the names of Handel and Beethoven are as foreign to him as the mines of Golconda; yet we may see him carefully selecting a halfpenny Jew’s-harp, examining its tongue with

⁵⁴ Jerdan, *Autobiography*, 251.

⁵⁵ “Music,” *Quarterly Review*, no. 83 (1848): 481–515.

⁵⁶ Benjamin Lumley, *Reminiscences of the Opera* (London, 1864), 321.

⁵⁷ “The ‘House of Lords’ and the ‘House of Commons,’” *ECJ*, 13 December 1851, 97–99, at 98.

⁵⁸ “‘House of Lords,’” *ECJ*, 99.

scrutinizing intensity, and fitting it to his teeth with as ready an aptitude as Paganini when he shouldered his magic violin . . . The boy is poor even to hunger, ragged even to semi-nudity, ignorant even to barbarity, yet the universal and imperishable essence flings its sparks from the rough crucible: there is "music in his soul."⁵⁹

Here, as often in her poetry, Cook drew impassioned connections between music and the extramundane: "We believe that music is born with us; it is one of the ethereal agencies that spiritualize our coarser senses, and it forms one of the links of divinity."⁶⁰ But she made no easy association between music and its supposed role in developing morality. Rather, music was depicted as exemplifying a living force of energy. The laboring classes, Cook implied, did not need to be taught music as a means of "civilising" them: rather, their own vigorous, innate musicality should be recognized, respected, and developed in a fashion readily available to more advantaged social groups.

In November 1851, Cook introduced a new column to the journal: "Our Musical Corner." It stemmed, she wrote, from a conversation with "two eminent musicians" ranging across her musical enthusiasms from Bach and Beethoven to John Parry and Michael William Balfe. One guest then suggested the journal include a column dedicated to music, and Cook was promptly "installed into the high responsible office of 'critic.'"⁶¹ But she proposed a different approach from the "scientific 'cutters-up' of 'heavy operas' and 'light ballads': "We intend simply to play over the new music that we often find on our table, and inform our young friends as to what pleases our fancy. We are somewhat eccentric in our taste at times, and never ashamed of owning a vulgar admiration, and should we offend a purely classic ear by our recommendation of something unrecognised by any 'school' and untraced by any opera score, please to remember, gentle reader, that we hereby propitiate your toleration."⁶²

Cook's embrace of all things musical is evident in the list of instruments found in her house: "two pianos, a flute, two violins, two flageolets, and an accordion," plus "a very tolerable drum," a slightly bent triangle, "a venerable double-bass and a most brazen cornet-a-piston." She herself claimed a level of competency on a range of instruments "beginning with the organ and ending with the Jews' Harp," and "an ancient hurdy-gurdy"⁶³—a more eclectic collection than might have been found in most households of female amateur musicians.

"Our Musical Corner" thus established a pattern of Cook's various musical observations, followed by her review of the latest ballads and keyboard transcriptions. Her conversational style, tart put-downs, and emotional disclosures made for lively reading. The column produced some of her most personal writing in the journal. Here we learn that her own relationship with music was inspired by a cherished music box given to her for her sixth birthday,⁶⁴ that street music had been the impetus for her musical knowledge, and that its invigorating contributions to the

⁵⁹ "Music, by Eliza Cook," *ECJ*, 3 September 1853, 289–91, at 289.

⁶⁰ "Music," 290.

⁶¹ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 29 November 1851, 78–79, at 78.

⁶² "Our Musical Corner," 79.

⁶³ "Our Musical Corner," 78.

⁶⁴ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 21 January 1854, 205–7.

urban environs deserved greater recognition.⁶⁵ She defended Jullien's popular concerts but loathed his opera,⁶⁶ preferred the accessibility of Henry Lunn's *Musings of a Musician* to Chorley's more theoretical *Modern German Music*,⁶⁷ and applauded Robert Cocks and Vincent Novello for their publication of cheap editions of classical music, regarding these as just as important for the development of society as material goods.⁶⁸ While championing music as a resource for all, she had a "horror" of faux-genteel amateur musical soirees and was wholly averse to music's systematic inclusion in female education (a "tyrannical and absurd" practice), but equally regretted when the pressures of domesticity prevented married women from continuing with their genuine aptitude for music making.⁶⁹

Her music reviews concentrated on whether a song or arrangement was original or catchy, difficult or easy for the amateur performer. Works were thus considered mostly from the perspective of a consumer: music appreciation rather than music criticism. Cook's judgment could be robust. Of "Beatrice" (its composer and poet unacknowledged), she wrote: "This is another of the twaddling lackadaisical namby-pamby school of ballads which ever excites our indignation and ridicule. Such drivelling rubbish is only fit for the cheesemonger."⁷⁰ One irritation (surprisingly, given the verdicts on her own writing) was sentimentalism: "We have a supreme contempt for the trash often printed as 'sentimental ballads.'" The application of the word "sentimental" to describe "a woman's fit of passionate hysterics, or a man's humour of puling inebriety" was, in her opinion, an abuse of the term.⁷¹ To Cook, "sentiment" was something quite different, best illustrated by her praise of Thomas Hood's "The Song of the Shirt": "All honour to Thomas Hood for arousing, prompting, and calling into actions feelings, which are all we have to trust to for changing this world of ours from the purgatory it is, into the paradise it may be!"⁷² Sentiment in Cook's view was thus not transitory sensual desire but those more profound feelings aroused by injustice, pain, grief, joy, and love that could provoke political and social change.⁷³

"Our Musical Corner" also revealed Cook's fledging efforts in composition: that aspect of musical endeavor most closed to women's participation.⁷⁴ Between 1852 and 1854, she produced ballad settings of eight (possibly nine) of her poems. Another expression of music's prominence in her life, composition might also have been an attempt to garner the considerable income some composers made from

⁶⁵ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 28 May 1853, 77–78, 77.

⁶⁶ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 25 September 1852, 349–50; "What Has Jullien Done?," *ECJ*, 20 November 1852, 59–60.

⁶⁷ "Musings of a Musician," *ECJ*, 10 June 1854, 109–11, at 109.

⁶⁸ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 19 March 1853, 331–32, at 332.

⁶⁹ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 27 November 1852, 76–77, at 77.

⁷⁰ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 3 July 1853, 219–21, at 220.

⁷¹ "Our Musical Corner," *ECJ*, 24 December 1853, 142–43, at 142.

⁷² "Thomas Hood," *ECJ*, 4 May 1850, 7–10, at 10.

⁷³ This view was a long-standing one in liberal discourse: Douglas Jerrold's article "Music for the Millions" in 1845 was built around Lear's injunction, "Take physic, Pomp! / Expose thyself to feel what wretches feel!" Douglas Jerrold, "Music for the Million," *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, February 1845, 155–59, at 158.

⁷⁴ On female composition, see Derek Scott, "The Sexual Politics of Victorian Musical Aesthetics," *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, no. 119 (1994): 91–114; Scott, *The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room and Parlour*, 2nd ed. (Abingdon, 2017), 60–80.

her lyrics. The songs were published by her brother Charles Cook, who had assumed publication of the journal in 1851. Five of the songs also appeared in the *Musical Bouquet*, while "The Piper's Daughter" was published by Oliver Ditson in Boston. Cook did not hesitate to advertise her compositional ventures in her own periodical and elsewhere. In critical terms, though, the songs met with silence, and in truth they lacked the vibrant individuality of Cook's writing style. While a certain promising aptitude for melody is apparent, the harmonization and accompaniment are often less convincing. The most evocative of the ballads was "Sweet Green Leaves," advertised as having been included by the "Russell Family in Their Vocal Entertainments" (Henry Russell and his son and daughters).⁷⁵ The reason Cook abandoned her compositional journey remains unclear, although the intervention of ill health may have been a factor.

If the other articles on music in the journal were not authored by Cook, they were presumably elicited or at least approved by her. A common theme was an emphasis on song, such as the history of ballads in various countries. The journal stole a march on the *Illustrated London News* in this respect, publishing an article entitled "Ballads of the People in the Olden Time" on 27 September 1851. Its thrust was the political nature of such music: "In these fragments of national song, composed by the people, sung, listened to, and preserved by the people, we gain all this knowledge which our historians have been so chary to record, and often find, to our satisfaction and delight, that deeds of State which were marked by oppression and cruelty, but which we have long been taught to consider as popular in their day, and enacted with the un murmuring concurrence of the people, were deeply hated and sturdily opposed by the great majority, who had no voice in their formation."⁷⁶

Already in preparation for the *Illustrated London News*, however, was an edition of English "national melodies" compiled by Charles Mackay and Sir Henry Bishop, published separately in supplement form over the next three years from 6 December 1851. A very different attitude to that of *Eliza Cook's Journal* is clearly apparent in the treatment of these ballads. Mackay's introductory article (and Bishop's private correspondence with the poet) stressed that his prime task was to bowdlerize the lyrics of their "immorality," "indecorum," and "vulgarity" to make them suitable for female performance in the drawing-room.⁷⁷ A later article in the journal argued against such appropriation and filleting of working-class culture, claiming that songs once regarded as encouraging "the noblest and gentlest passions" were now considered "low and vulgar," their lyrics exchanged for the much inferior "inanity" of modern "verbiage."⁷⁸

Over the course of its 291 issues, *Eliza Cook's Journal* therefore claimed a robust vision of music's value and purpose for the laboring classes: music of the streets enlivening urban environs; music accompanying work in the fields, at sea, or (more rarely) in the factories; and, through popular song and dance, music connecting people to their own history, culture, and sense of nationhood. By contrast, the journal implied, much of this rich experience was denied to the middle classes,

⁷⁵ Cover of "Sweet Green Leaves. The Words and Music by Eliza Cook. Sung by the Russell Family in Their Vocal Entertainments," *Musical Bouquet*, no. 439 (London, 1854), 23–26.

⁷⁶ "Ballads of the People in the Olden Time," *ECJ*, 27 September 1851, 340–42, at 340.

⁷⁷ *Illustrated London News*, 6 December 1851.

⁷⁸ "Our Balladists," *ECJ*, 2 October 1852, 361–63.

whose office-bound labor could not be alleviated by music, whose ideas of social division precluded them from engaging in the folk culture of their past, and whose musical encounters were mainly limited to empty display of mediocre talent, often of foreign music to which they had little or no connection. Such ideas were not unfamiliar in progressive discourse, but their energized reiteration in Cook's journal arguably brought them to a new readership.⁷⁹

Mary Ann Smart makes the telling point that “for music to be considered as ‘political,’ it should be possible to demonstrate that it has affected some aspect of concrete reality: the experience of hearing the music must have changed events in some fundamental way for listeners.”⁸⁰ Cook's “hearing” of music in all its varied abundance eludes any narrow alignment with nominated political factions (either Chartist or Liberal), but it resulted in a singular contribution to the history of music in Victorian Britain during her brief period of editorship. No other woman of working-class origins left such sustained responses to the music of her day or reached so broad a readership during the early 1850s. The *Musical Times*, selling for the same price as Cook's journal, had what Leanne Langley describes as a “large national circulation,”⁸¹ but in 1852 that readership was proudly declared as “exceeding 7,000”—a fraction of the figures achieved by Cook.⁸² No other periodical for a predominantly female readership embraced popular music to such an extent, argued so vigorously for the enjoyment of street music, or dared to dispute the value of music as a feminine accomplishment.⁸³ None gave so much space to presenting the political dimension of music and song and the latter's role in expressing radical ideas and sensibilities. In short, through both her poetry and her prose, Cook actively promoted an interest in the politics of music—what constituted music's role in society, who had access to music—and a certain resistance to the conventional moralizing narrative in favor of a more open approach anticipating modern ideas about popular culture and its charting of lived experience.⁸⁴

In demonstrating that women need not confine their ruminations on music to fiction or anonymity, Cook's stance was early confirmation that the personal is also political. Her boldness might have influenced others. In 1850, Sarah Glover's name appeared on a new edition of her treatise; in 1851, Mary Holmes reprinted the anonymous articles on music she had written for the *Lady's Newspaper* the previous year as *A Few Words about Music*, albeit only under her initials. Other female authors remained cautious. In 1852, Lady Eastlake published her aforementioned essay from the *Quarterly Review* in book form but without declaring her identity

⁷⁹ For example, see “The Place of the Fine Arts in Society,” *Douglas Jerrold's Shilling Magazine*, July 1847, 72–82, at 80–82.

⁸⁰ Mary Ann Smart, *Waiting for Verdi: Opera and Political Opinion in Nineteenth-Century Italy, 1815–1848* (Chicago, 2018), 9.

⁸¹ Leanne Langley, “The Musical Press in Nineteenth-Century England,” *Notes*, 2nd ser., no. 46 (1990): 583–92, at 589.

⁸² “Preface to the Fourth Volume,” *Musical Times and Singing Class Circular*, vol. 4 (London, 1852): i.

⁸³ Mentions of music in *The Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, for example, were largely reserved for fictional writing or summaries of opera plots: see *Englishwoman's Domestic Magazine*, December 1857, 255; or the list of items in *Victoria Magazine*, December 1865, 192.

⁸⁴ Emma Griffin, “Popular Culture in Industrializing England,” *Historical Journal* 45, no. 3 (2002): 619–35, at 620. See also Kate Bowan and Paul A. Pickering, “Songs for the Millions: Chartist Music and Popular Aural Tradition,” *Labour History Review* 74, no. 1 (2009): 44–63.

(her gender was nonetheless made apparent in Henry Fothergill Chorley's review in the *Athenaeum*);⁸⁵ Mary Cowden-Clarke assumed the editorship of the *Musical Times* from 1853 to 1856, although her name never appeared in it and she made no reference to that role in her autobiography;⁸⁶ George Eliot anonymously published her first major essay on music, "Liszt, Wagner, and Weimar," in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1855.⁸⁷ The first declaredly female British music critic of any note is Rosa Newmarch, who only began writing toward the end of the century.⁸⁸ Might it all have been different if Cook had not been frozen out by the middle-class literary circle and the legacy of scholarship it produced?⁸⁹ In their eyes, she wrote neither "Art" nor "Criticism." Fortunately for us, in her "loud and open speaking," she wrote "Life" instead.

⁸⁵ Elizabeth Rigby, Lady Eastlake, *Music and the Art of Dress* (London, 1852); "New Publications," *Athenaeum*, 17 April 1852, 434.

⁸⁶ Mary Cowden-Clarke, *My Long Life: An Autobiographic Sketch* (1896; repr. Cambridge, 2010).

⁸⁷ George Eliot, "Liszt, Wagner and Weimar," in *Essays of George Eliot*, ed. Thomas Pinney (London, 1963), 96–122.

⁸⁸ Charlotte Purkis, "Leader of Fashion in Musical Thought': The Importance of Rosa Newmarch in the Context of Turn-of-the-Century British Music Appreciation," in *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Horton and Bennett Zon (Ashgate, 2003), 3–20.

⁸⁹ For example, see Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dismissal of Cook's poetry in letters to Mary Mitford between 1839 and 1845, "Persons," *The Brownings' Correspondence*, accessed 25 January 2021, www.browningscorrespondence.com.