"Organ Grinder's Swing": representations of street music in New York City, 1850-1937

Michael David Accinno
University of Iowa

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“ORGAN GRINDER’S SWING”: REPRESENTATIONS OF STREET MUSIC IN NEW YORK CITY, 1850-1937

by

Michael David Accinno

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Arts degree in Music in the Graduate College of The University of Iowa

July 2010

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This is to certify that the Master’s thesis of

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has been approved by the Examining Committee for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree in Music at the July 2010 graduation.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank many people for their kind encouragement and support. The staff of the Rita Benton Music Library and the Interlibrary Loan Department of the University of Iowa were instrumental in helping me find and retrieve much of the research materials related to this project. Rare archival documents related to Charles Cadman were retrieved through the Iowa Digital Library, an important resource with a wealth of digitized content that has continued to surprise me.

The initial idea for this thesis grew out of a project on Charles Cadman’s opera *The Willow Tree* for a music editing seminar taught by Christine Getz in the spring of 2009. Both Dr. Getz and my classmates offered helpful criticism that allowed me to further refine my initial assessment of Cadman’s opera. Access to the manuscript copies of *The Willow Tree* was graciously facilitated by the staff of the New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, archivist Kathy Kienholz of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and Barry Kernfeld of the Special Collections Library at the Pennsylvania State University. Both Dr. Kernfeld and Marie Sumner Lott went beyond the call of duty and personally inspected several items within Penn State’s Charles Wakefield Cadman Collection on my behalf.

I am extremely grateful to Denise Von Glahn, Gayle Sherwood Magee, and Jennifer Iverson for meeting with me to share some of their personal insights into the music of Charles Ives. The community of Ives scholars has proved to be very unselfish with their time, and their creative, well-researched prose has strongly informed my own research into the iconic composer.

I would like to especially thank my advisor, Marian Wilson Kimber, for her support and patience throughout every stage of this project. She has provided invaluable suggestions
that have shaped both the methodology and writing of this project. Finally, I would like to thank Douglas Di Carlo of the La Guardia and Wagner archives for providing access to Fiorello La Guardia’s extant mayoral correspondence, and for humorously asking me, “so why organ grinders?” I can only hope that this thesis will serve as an adequate and useful answer to his question.
ABSTRACT

Between approximately 1850 and 1936, the barrel organ was one of the most commonly heard instruments in the streets of New York and the frequent subject of written, visual, and musical accounts created by middle class authors and artists. The instrument’s loud, wheezy tunes inspired heated debates that began in the nineteenth century and were often aligned with the broader social upheavals caused by Italian immigration.

Despite their frequent differences in perspective, most written accounts characterized organ grinders as poor, uneducated, Italian immigrants. Musical representations of street music developed a similar proclivity to emphasize Italian alterity. As early as the 1850s, it was common to quote popular dance idioms to evoke street music, a trend that continued well into the early twentieth century in Tin Pan Alley songs. These strophic songs offered more elaborate portrayals of organ grinders, mimicking the dialect of Italian immigrants through clipped, misspelled syllables.

Street musicians declined in the twentieth century, but such stereotypes continued to resonate strongly within fictive musical portrayals. In Charles Ives’ From Hanover Square North, the clashing quotations of a gospel hymn aurally signify the program’s commuters and organ grinder, whose music animates the scene similar to a tableau found within Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The House of Seven Gables. In contrast to Ives’ idealistic conception of street music, Charles Cadman’s opera The Willow Tree depicts a murderous street musician whose association with pleasant, Italian folk music does little to belie his unstable actions.

Mayor Fiorello La Guardia’s 1936 decision to stop licensing organ grinders created a controversy that may have influenced representations of organ grinders in Marc Blitzstein’s I’ve Got the Tune and the animated short Organ Grinder’s Swing. The 1936 controversy
suggested that not only were middle class audiences concerned with unprecedented waves of Italian immigration, they were also worried about an urban soundscape increasingly saturated with noise. It was these twin problems that led a class of educated New Yorkers to create meaning by reverting to ethnic, class-based stereotype.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF TABLES** viii  
**LIST OF FIGURES** ix  
**LIST OF EXAMPLES** x  
**INTRODUCTION** 1  
**CHAPTER**  
1. STREET MUSIC IN NEW YORK: A HISTORICAL SURVEY 8  
   1.1 Immigration and Street Music 10  
   1.2 “Our calculations confused, our minds paralyzed”: Street Music as Threat 14  
   1.3 Educating the Heathens: Liberal Responses to Street Music 17  
   1.4 The Politics of Street Music 21  
   1.5 “Grinding” out the Canon: Street Music and Musical Borrowing 28  
2. “THAT MACARONI TWIST”: REPRESENTING THE STREET IN SONG 31  
   2.1 “Hand Organ Polka”: Aspects of Musical Style 32  
   2.2 “I play de’ org’ so sweet-a”: Italian Dialect and Stereotype 36  
   2.3 Eloping with the Organ Man: Male Insecurity, Female Desire 40  
   2.4 Of Monkeys, Moustaches, and Children: Illustrating Sheet Music 43  
3. CHARLES IVES AND TRANSCENDENTAL IMAGINATION: RECONSIDERING FROM HANOVER SQUARE NORTH 56  
4. STREET MUSIC IN CHARLES CADMAN’S THE WILLOW TREE 69  
   4.1 Opera on NBC Radio: An Early History 70  
   4.2 “Ten strong fingers and an iron fist!”: The Willow Tree and Street Music 74  
5. STREET MUSIC AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN THE 1930s 82  
   5.1 “Hey Fiorello, you’re a dago too”: Fiorello La Guardia and The Street Music Ban 84  
   5.2 Sounds of Protest: Marc Blitzstein’s I’ve Got the Tune 90  
   5.3 “It’s not so good, but nobody mind”: Animating the Organ Man 93  
   5.4 Jazz and Street Music 103
LIST OF TABLES

Table 1. Italian Immigration to the United States by Decade 12
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Whitelaw Reid and Horace Greeley as Organ Grinder and Monkey 26
Figure 2. Whitelaw Reid and Samuel Tilden as Organ Grinder and Monkey 27
Figure 3. The Cover of “The Hurdy Gurdy Man” 45
Figure 4. The Cover of “The Sidewalks of New York” 46
Figure 5. The Cover of Charles Harris’ “The Organ Grinder’s Serenade” 48
Figure 6. Tony the Monkey in The Organ Grinder (1933) 97
Figure 7. A Monkey Singing Scat in My Friend the Monkey (1939) 100
Figure 8. The Organ Grinder in The Organ Man (left) and My Friend the Monkey (right) 100
# LIST OF EXAMPLES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>mm.</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Example 1</td>
<td>Mathias Philippi, “The Beautiful Hand Organ Polka,”</td>
<td>1-8</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 2</td>
<td>Charles Neil Daniel, “Niccolini,”</td>
<td>1-12</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 3</td>
<td>Walter Donaldson, “When Verdi Plays the Hurdy Gurdy,”</td>
<td>27-36</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 4</td>
<td>Charles Harris, “Organ Grinder’s Serenade,”</td>
<td>80-119</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 5</td>
<td>Charles Harris, “After the Ball is Over,”</td>
<td>73-83</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 6</td>
<td>Charles Harris, “Creep baby, Creep,”</td>
<td>50-65</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 7</td>
<td>Charles Harris, “While the Dance Goes On,”</td>
<td>75-82</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 8</td>
<td>“In the Sweet Bye and Bye,”</td>
<td>9-16</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 9</td>
<td>Desdemona’s Aria from Act IV, Scene 1 of Giuseppe Verdi’s Otello</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 10</td>
<td>Donella’s Aria from Charles Cadman’s The Willow Tree</td>
<td></td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 11</td>
<td>Pietro’s Aria From The Willow Tree</td>
<td></td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 12</td>
<td>Pietro’s Arioso from The Willow Tree</td>
<td></td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 13</td>
<td>Marc Blitzstein, “Quick Waltz,” “I’ve Got the Tune,” Scene 5</td>
<td></td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Example 14</td>
<td>Partial Transcription “The Organ Grinder” from the Animated Short The Organ Grinder</td>
<td></td>
<td>96</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
INTRODUCTION

Between approximately 1850 and 1936, the barrel organ was one of the most common instruments heard in the streets of New York City, more familiar to the average city-dweller than most European concert ensembles. The performance of such music has been largely overlooked within the field of historical musicology, as street music falls beyond its traditional methodologies, which have emphasized score study and analysis. More recent scholarship on musical reception has generated historical narratives that have narrowly focused their attention on the developing prestige of concert music. In recent decades, however, musicologists have begun to reconsider the discipline’s ideological biases. Philip Bohlman critiqued the traditional reliance on score study as the “essentializing of music itself,”¹ and instead advocated engagement with what he termed music of the “public sphere.”² The music of barrel organs is one such mode of “public” performance that can benefit from increased historical scrutiny.

This thesis will explore how written, visual, and musical representations of American street musicians propagated ethnic stereotype and caricature. A variety of instruments were played in the streets beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, but none of them evinced the reactions that the barrel organ brought forth.³ The mixed popular opinion surrounding the performers with barrel organs, colloquially known as organ

² Ibid, 433.
³ The terms hand-organ, barrel organ, and organ grinder are all adequate descriptions of this class of musicians, and will be used more or less interchangeably throughout this study.
grinders, can best be understood by examining their rise and eventual decline in New York City.

Due to its importance as a commercial center of the street music trade, New York functions as an ideal case study in examining the nexus of changes, both social and musical, that affected portrayals of street music.⁴ Using historical accounts, iconography, animated shorts, and music, ranging from parlor songs to opera and an orchestral tone poem, this thesis will demonstrate that popular opinion of organ grinders was shaped not only through personal encounters with the performers, but also through a variety of mediated forms of representation. These genres in turn reflected common middle class concerns about the rising number of European immigrants and the increasingly noisy urban soundscape.

A historical examination of music in the streets of nineteenth-century New York City in Chapter 1 provides the context for subsequent fictive portrayals of organ grinders and their cohorts. The commonplace music of the organ grinder, which was characterized by strophic, recognizable tunes within a relatively homogenous “wheezy” sound aesthetic, evinced two distinct ideological reactions.⁵ Liberal reformers responded to musicians that were often poor, Italian immigrants through a program of education and

⁴ Susie J. Tanenbaum’s study of music on the subways of New York is a fine example of research that engages strongly with the tradition of street music. However, the focus of her investigation is centered around the living tradition of music in urban spaces, while generally neglecting historical inquiry. Susie Tanenbaum, *Underground Harmonies: Music and Politics in the Subways of New York* (Ithaca: Cornell, 1995).

⁵ For an organological study of the barrel organ, see Arthur W.J.G. Ord-Hume, *Barrel Organ: The Story of the Mechanical Organ and its Repair* (South Brunswick, New Jersey: A.S. Barnes, 1978). While Ord-Hume’s book is somewhat euro-centric, it represents the most detailed published research on the subject. It is, therefore, the necessary starting point for any initial inquiry into organ grinders.
social uplift, while conservatives directly responded to the music through threats of legal action and the implementation of noise ordinances.

The diverging accounts of hand-organ players as found in literature, historical periodicals, and iconography were not conceived from a neutral perspective, but instead reflected the stratified concerns of their middle class authors. These texts introduced a pattern of appropriation by the middle class that began during the second half of the nineteenth century and continued even as the number of organ grinders dwindled in the early 1900s. Through depictions of organ grinders that portrayed the musicians either as noisy interlopers of city life or as entertaining, if flawed, figures worthy of appreciation, the middle class used its discourse about music in part to frame its concerns and biases about the alterity of immigrant culture and the changing composition of the urban lower classes.

Extant sheet music described in Chapter 2 demonstrates how composers continued the pattern of appropriation by adopting a textual and musical style that often framed organ grinders as an Italian, lower class Other. Piano miniatures and strophic songs that alluded to street music made use of popular dance idioms such as the waltz and polka, genres that organ grinders had helped to propagate during the nineteenth century. The text of these songs often revealed more about their authors and audiences than they did about the musicians they caricatured. Generally written in a exaggerated Italian accent to set street musicians apart from the native population, the lyrics of these songs

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6 While references to organ grinders are fairly common in periodicals such as the *New York Times* and *Harper’s Weekly*, music journals are relatively quiet on the subject. One exception was an article that appeared in *Dwight’s Journal of Music* bemoaning the “murder” of music by an organ grinder. See Anon, “A Sermon to Organ Grinders,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 17 (1860): 145.
explore the imagined ways in which organ grinders interacted with people, often women and children, thereby altering the social fabric of the neighborhoods that surrounded them.

In addition to sheet music, other genres portrayed street musicians during the early decades of the twentieth century. One such work, Charles Ives’ orchestral movement *From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose* (1915), will be reinterpreted in Chapter 3 to better account for the appearance of an organ grinder in the composer’s published program. Within the allegorical program, the hand organ plays “In the Sweet Bye and Bye” on the day of the sinking of the Lusitania, and a group of New York commuters spontaneously begin to hum and sing the tune of the protestant hymn. Unlike previous analyses of the work, this thesis will argue that Ives’s orchestral movement responded to the powerful expressions of solidarity brought forth in the disaster by figuratively and aurally aligning the helpless feelings of the commuters with the organ grinder, thus projecting the unexpected trauma of the majority onto a suppressed minority for whom vulnerability was unfortunately a regular occurrence.

The rise of mass media in the 1920s and 30s gave consumers increased flexibility in choosing where and when to interact with music. Despite the concurrent decline of organ grinders during this era, street musicians were still used to signify an immigrant

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7 Numerous studies have not sufficiently explored the implications of the hand organ’s presence in the program, despite the fact that the instrument introduces “In the Sweet Bye and Bye,” a hymn tune heavily quoted in Ives’ musical realization. See, for example, J. Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing* (New Haven: Yale, 1995), 262-265; Gayle Sherwood Magee, *Charles Ives Reconsidered* (Urbana: Illinois, 2008), 118-120; Denise Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place: Music and the American Cultural Landscape* (Boston: Northeastern University, 2003), 90-105.
culture that was viewed as a threat to social cohesion. A discussion of Charles Cadman’s opera *The Willow Tree* (1932) in Chapter 4 will provide a means to document the rise of radio as a medium and to further explore tropes that portrayed Italian immigrants as dangerous Other.\(^8\) Despite a significant dwindling of street musicians in the 1930s, Cadman’s opera demonstrates that stereotypes about the performers continued to exist in the public’s collective imagination.

The final blow to historical street musicians in New York City occurred in 1936, when then-Mayor Fiorello La Guardia discontinued the licensing of organ grinders. The public and artistic responses that ensued, discussed in Chapter 5, demonstrate how political ideology often framed the struggle to classify barrel organs as either noise or music. Extant letters from both the Mayor and his detractors will be used to demonstrate that while both invoked ideals of democracy and civic pride, the conclusions they reached were often dramatically opposed.

Artistic responses to the ban were similarly influenced by the ideological motivations of their creators. In Marc Blitzstein’s *I’ve Got the Tune* (1937), an allusion to the music of hand organs placed the banned music at odds with the composer’s unique brand of socialist activism.\(^9\) Thus, to Blitzstein, the barrel organ’s demise meant that the

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\(^8\) The section on *The Willow Tree* within H.D. Perison’s study of Charles Cadman’s music is fairly brief and does not take into consideration more recent archival research undertaken by this author at Penn State’s Charles Cadman Archive and NBC Radio’s Archives in the Library of Congress. H.D. Perison, “Charles Wakefield Cadman: His Life and Works,” (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1978).

\(^9\) Marc Blitzstein’s *I’ve Got the Tune* has been discussed in detail in Akihiro Taniguchi’s dissertation on music and early radio. However, Taniguchi does not venture to explain why Blitzstein included the tune of an organ grinder. Akihiro Taniguchi, “Music for the Microphone: Network Broadcasts and the Creation of American Compositions in the Golden Age of Radio” (Ph.D. diss., The Florida State University, 2003).
instrument could no longer be useful in channeling the disruptive noise of the proletariat. In contrast, the New York-based creators of the Popeye short *Organ Grinder’s Swing* (1936) repackaged the social and aural relevance of the street musicians by using an emerging musical style, jazz, as the basis of the cartoon’s soundtrack. Unlike animated shorts about organ grinders from the 1930s that unabashedly waded into the early racial politics of jazz, the cartoon responded directly to the political controversy that had taken place in New York City. Despite the humorous gags of Popeye and arch-nemesis Bluto, or perhaps because of them, *Organ Grinder’s Swing* typified a common struggle in 1930s New York to distinguish music from noise.

This project initially began as a somewhat naïve effort to recover the “true” street musicians that history had forgotten. The portrait that emerges, however, does not chronicle the perspectives and emotions of the street musicians themselves, but those of their middle class listeners. Through representations of street music, middle class musicians, composers, and audiences could come to terms in some small way with the enormous challenges wrought by waves of immigration, an unprecedented migration of people that quickly reshaped ethnic and racial assumptions.

The mediated history of street music can also help us imagine how immigrants and native inhabitants alike responded to a soundscape increasingly beset with technological innovation, during an era in which, as David Goodman notes, “noise

10 Carol Oja’s study of Blitzstein’s 1930s song style provides excellent insights into understanding the composer’s political and musical motivations during this era. Carol Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s *The Cradle Will Rock* and Mass-Song Style of the 1930s,” *The Musical Quarterly* 73 (1989): 445-475.
became a condition of modern urban life rather than an episodic interruption of it.”

As this thesis will demonstrate, the barrel organ’s rise and fall can help us understand that the noise of modernity was not just an aural dilemma, but one with social dimensions as well. As it turns out, the true din and racket stirred up by street music was not only imitations of Verdi or wheezy gospel tunes, but also that of prejudice, appropriation, and misunderstanding.

CHAPTER 1
STREET MUSIC IN NEW YORK: A HISTORICAL SURVEY

A child two and a half years of age, in Boston, had been dangerously ill of typhoid fever for some days. The crisis had passed, and strong hopes were entertained that it might survive, when suddenly an organ grinder struck up a tune directly in front of the house. In a moment the child sunk back and died. It is supposed the sudden alarm caused by the noise of the organ was the cause of its death.

“News by the Mails,” New York Times, April 29, 1852

The streets of nineteenth-century urban America were a noisy affair. Street criers, newsboys, scissors grinders, and musicians all jostled for the attention of passersby, establishing their commercial and social presence in part through sonic means.1 Despite the general cacophony of city streets, however, musicians were often singled out for special scorn. Although the child’s death in the previous account could have been attributed to the aural tumult of the streets—an unpleasant reality of urban areas which was thought in part to contribute to the diagnosis of neurasthenia—it was instead blamed on the organ grinder, a musician whose tunes were literally portrayed as being capable of inflicting death upon its listeners.2

This chapter will elucidate two distinct socio-political agendas that mobilized in response to street music and its purveyors in nineteenth-century New York. Historical accounts such as newspapers and letters provide useful insights into the musical practice and


reception of hand organ players and their cohorts, but they often reveal more about contemporary sensibilities and concerns than they do about the musicians themselves. Building upon John Pickers’ observation that, “deliberations over street music served as a gauge of an urban community’s explicit demands and entrenched biases,”³ I identify two prevailing ideological stances adopted in response to New York’s street musicians. Liberal reformers reacted to the perceived root causes of street music, the poverty and low education levels of its performers, by opening schools and conducting outreach efforts that that emphasized assimilation into American culture through education.

In contrast, conservative advocates offered a more direct approach: to curtail the music itself. Their law and order approach emphasized increased police intervention and the implementation of noise ordinances,⁴ social instruments of sonic control that tended to maintain class distinctions rather than diminish them.⁵ These conflicting agendas resulted in a mixture of positive and negative portrayals of street musicians, many of them tinged with misunderstanding or fear of the city’s growing immigrant population. At worst, street musicians were caricatured as itinerant criminals, a noisy distraction whose very presence could affect the physical health of the citizenry; at best, the performers were portrayed as the guardians of childhood innocence, whose very presence could signal the arrival of springtime.

³ Picker is referring specifically to the city of London, but his observation may also serve as a useful conceptual framework in exploring similar issues in New York City. Picker, Victorian Soundscapes, 45.


⁵ Picker, “The Soundproof Study,” 451; Picker, Victorian Soundscapes, 45.
Immigration and Street Music

As John Zucchi has noted, a large presence of foreign street musicians were first noticed in New York during the 1840s. Contemporary observers identified the hand organ as the instrument of choice amongst these immigrant performers, although some accounts also mentioned violins, harps, accordions, and tambourines. Stories that appeared in the *New York Times* tended to describe the musicians as a mixture of adult and child performers mostly of Italian, Catholic background. The small population of Italians in the United States during this period, which added only 1,900 new immigrants in the country during the 1840’s, suggests that musicians constituted a large segment of the then fledgling Italian community. A recent examination of the 1870 census records of a neighborhood on Mulberry Street in New York’s Little Italy found that of 50 Italian men on the block, 39 of them were employed as organ grinders. In 1872, author James McCabe described street musicians as “mostly Italians,” adding, however, that, “one sees among them Germans, Frenchman, Swiss, and even Englishmen and Irishmen.”

Emigration from Italy rose to significant numbers in the 1880’s and 1890’s, bringing with it a rise in xenophobia and anti-Italian sentiment. Fleeing political strife, famine, and an assortment of natural disasters, hundreds of thousands of Italians moved to the United States in the closing decades of the century. It is estimated that more than four million Italians had

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made the journey across the Atlantic by the 1920s, the majority of them entering through Ellis Island and quickly settling in New York’s crowded tenements (see Table 1).

Like many Europeans who moved to the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Italians emigrated in a “network-driven process” that allowed them to preserve aspects of their familial, regional, and vocational identities. Franc Sturino has described successive waves of Italian immigration as a series of “chains” beginning with “the migration of males through the labor agents or padroni” and followed by “the serial migration of workers through the assistance of other established lone laborers; and delayed family migration uniting wives and children with breadwinners.” Street musicians participated in this larger pattern of immigration. The padroni, labor brokers who facilitated the initial wave of immigrants, recruited adult and child street musicians, and often rented out instruments to them upon their initial arrival in New York. Zucchi has shown that hand organ players and their families came largely from the more prosperous northern regions of Italy, principally the duchy of Parma; other musicians hailed from the more impoverished


14 The bulk of Zucchi’s monograph traces legislative and social efforts to curtail child musicians within the often abusive padrone system. See especially his chapter on New York City. *The Little Slaves of the Harp*, 111-143.
Table 1. Italian Immigration to the United States by Decade

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Decade</th>
<th>Number of Immigrants</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1820-1830</td>
<td>439</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1831-1840</td>
<td>2253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1841-1850</td>
<td>1870</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1851-1860</td>
<td>9231</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861-1870</td>
<td>11,725</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871-1880</td>
<td>55,759</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881-1890</td>
<td>307,309</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891-1900</td>
<td>651,893</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901-1910</td>
<td>2,045,877</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911-1920</td>
<td>1,109,524</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Note: A significant minority of migrant laborers eventually returned to Italy.
southern regions around Potenza, as well as the Ciociaria, a central region of the country.\textsuperscript{15}

Reactions to this mass migration were anything but monolithic. Faced with a large influx of foreign-born citizens, the United States was left to pursue two possible approaches. Either the native citizenry could pursue a policy of integration that would encourage the assimilation of foreign elements of the population, or they could actively discourage integration from taking place.\textsuperscript{16} In the realm of the city or within an individual neighborhood, abstract political notions of integration and separation could intermingle with more practical considerations of everyday life. It was during the normal activities of daily life, such as sleeping, eating, or walking to work, that even a person of little political convictions could see their routine augmented by the shrill beat of a tambourine or the repetitive melodies of an organ grinder.

Unintended encounters with street music released the stresses of urban life for some, while exacerbating it for others. Although citizens could not always come to agreement on the issue of street music, both sides of the debate began to develop stereotyped preconceptions about the swelling numbers of Italian immigrants in New York City. Phrases such as “Italian organ grinder” increasingly entered the lexicon, suggesting an inherent connection between ethnicity and vocation, and signaling the public’s growing fascination with the exotic, Italian Other.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 18-19. Although I use the term “country,” Italy was an amalgam of smaller principalities and city-states until unification was achieved in 1871.

\textsuperscript{16} Although assimilation has been strongly questioned in recent years by immigration scholars, I believe the concept still holds value within the context of nineteenth-century political and social thought. For a contemporary reassessment of the term, see Richard Alba and Victor Nee, \textit{Remaking the American Mainstream: Assimilation and Contemporary Immigration} (Cambridge: Harvard University, 2005), 1-16.
“Our calculations confused, our minds paralyzed”: Street Music as Threat

In the nineteenth-century, both American and European cities witnessed the rise of a large, educated middle class that was increasingly willing to assert its own voice. Street musicians often faced the ire of these citizens in the form of fiery condemnations in newspaper columns and letters to the editor that compared organ grinding to murder and physical violence. Although Picker has argued that these efforts reflected a struggle by working class professionals to develop spaces of silence complementary to their work, there is reason to question his conceptual framework. Newspapers, writings, and commentaries in New York sometimes made reference to the ongoing street music debate in England, but American writers harbored their own particular set of biases and agendas. Despite the similar scope of evidence, the different class structures and political cultures of the United States and Victorian England demand that each set of source materials be evaluated separately.

Furthermore, Picker’s argument rests on the implicit assumption that all middle class professionals preferred or required a place of silence in which to complete their work. While this may be generally true in the case of professional writers, members of other professions were not burdened with a similar requirement or expectation. They too voiced objections to

17 Picker, Victorian Soundscapes, 43.

18 I do not mean to suggest that Picker adopts this approach. In fact, he uses only evidence from English periodicals and accounts to support his claims. Since the scope of this thesis is limited to the areas around New York City, I will only attempt to respond to some of his larger claims about street music. A recent dissertation by Ronda Sewald, however, does freely comingle British and American sources to question aspects of Picker’s arguments. While she marshals a wealth of documentary evidence to support her claims, Sewald’s approach tends to obscure rather than clarify differences between the two nations and cultures. See Ronda Sewald, “The Darker Side of Sound: Conflicts over the Use of Soundscapes for Musical Performances” (Ph.D. diss., Indiana University, 2009), 143-257.
the presence of street music, suggesting that complaints about street music were grounded in aesthetic or practical concerns rather than merely a desire for silence. A broker’s 1856 letter to the editor of the *New York Times*, for example, complained about the ubiquitous presence of organ grinders, noting their propensity to damage both the music and its listeners:

We people downtown are not only posted, but pilloried, garroted, crucified, by those same instruments of tortures called organs. . . . From 10 A.M. to 4 P.M. all our conversations are interrupted, our calculations confused, our minds paralyzed, by continually hearing no “Norma,” but a miserable combination of wire, wood, and wind, appealing to the moon, to the tune of “Casta Diva.” May kind Providence somehow continue to chase the chaste Goddess away out of my orbit to where, by no amount of parallax, I can ever be brought within her influence forever more.\(^{19}\)

“Casta Diva,” from Vincenzo Bellini’s popular opera *Norma*, was one of the most popular arias in the nineteenth century.\(^{20}\) The broker is expressing a fairly common complaint about the ubiquitous and repetitive presence of the tune. He is also casting judgment on the performance in purely aesthetic terms. The melody is a poorly contrived simulacra of the aria forged of “wire, wood, and wind,” a remark signaling the writer’s desire for, or at least a familiarity with, a more aesthetically beautiful rendition of the aria.

In his letter, the broker also muses if the metaphorical “crime” that the hand organ player allegedly perpetrates against the music and the listener would not justify a violent response against the organ grinder himself. This line of reasoning places both the listener and the music on equal footing as victims of street music, positioning the music as an

\(^{19}\) “From a Dyspeptic Broker about Organ-grinding,” *New York Daily Times*, September 12, 1856.

independently valuable object that, like humans, should be protected from violence. A subsequent response to the broker’s letter enthusiastically took up this line of reasoning:

‘Broker’ asks if it be a crime to shoot an organ grinder. I should say no, provided he ‘will distinguish between the man and the act.’ He may not legally take the life of an individual, but I see no objection to his shooting the organ grinder.  

The anonymous author’s sardonic if illogical contention, which advocated punishing the sin of being an organ grinder while “sparing” the sinner, was not a rare sentiment in discourse that objected to street music. If organ grinding was capable of murdering music and one’s personal sensitivities, then to assault the instrument’s purveyor could be construed as an act of self-defense.

A newspaper article in the *Evening Post* entitled “Some Considerations Touching Organ-grinders, and the Lawfulness and Propriety of Putting Them to Death” further developed the rationale, in heavily satirical terms, for murdering organ grinders who themselves “murdered” the music they were playing.  

Thus, Picker’s assessment that street music threatened the physical bodies of the middle class is in need of expansion. It was not only that opponents of organ grinding feared the music could cause them physical harm, it was also that such performances threatened to damage the purity of music itself. It was as if music could be protected with the same legal rights and protections usually only extended to human beings.


22 The article was subsequently reprinted in specialized music periodicals. See “Some considerations touching organ-grinders, and the lawfulness and propriety of putting them to death,” *Dwight’s Journal of Music* 13 (1858): 197; *The New York Musical World* 20 (1858): 564.

23 Picker, *Victorian Soundscapes*, 43.
Educating the Heathens: Liberal Responses to Street Music

Although such negative backlashes against street music were common, others defended it, emphasizing the music’s appeal and its accessibility to the lower classes. An 1857 editorial piece in the *New York Times* contrasted opera audiences with the audiences for hand organ players:

The hand-organ is the Opera of the street, and its audiences are infinitely larger, and more thoroughly pleased, though less critical, than those who crowd the Academy of Music. We are quite sure that the organ soothes more pain, relieves more care, brings more relaxation and delight... than the Opera.

We object, therefore, to the current wholesale censure of the organ-grinder. We regard him as a useful member of society. We like his music ourselves, and we are relieved whenever we hear him, as we generally do, under our office window at midnight. And we are very confident that nine-tenths of the community, if the choice were required, would vote for the suppression of the Opera rather than that of the Organ-grinders of the City.\(^\text{24}\)

Notably, the authors organize their argument in classist terms, claiming both the lower and middle classes as the beneficiaries of street music while ignoring the more curmudgeonly voices of dissent. They also reposition street music’s effect on the bodies of its listeners; rather than causing physical pain and committing aural “murder,” the hand organ “soothes” and “relieves” the mental and physical states of its audience.

Street musicians also found a sympathetic ally in reformers whose stated agenda was to integrate immigrants and their families through outreach and education. Similar to its influence in other street trades of the nineteenth century, the padrone system of labor agents ensured that child street musicians were a fairly common sight in the early nineteenth century. Thus, child welfare reformers took an especially keen interest in assisting these children rise out of tragic circumstances. In 1855, child welfare advocate Charles Loring

\(^\text{24}\) “The Opera of the Street,” *New York Daily Times*, April 7, 1857.
Brace described the general sentiments of the reform movement: “Who, that has means and sympathy for these bright, sunny little creatures of a foreign land, will not lend a hand in a practical effort to educate and elevate them?”

An early account of child street musicians appeared in 1853 as part of a series of articles in the Times entitled “Walks Among the New York Poor.” For the story, the paper dispatched Brace to a colony of Italian organ grinders living close to the Five Points neighborhood, New York City’s infamous slum, which was largely populated with poor immigrants. Brace founded the renowned Children’s Aid Society later that same year, and in 1872 wrote an influential book about his experiences with the city’s poorer classes.

Brace’s account makes obvious his educational agenda and the broader goal of assimilating immigrants into an American way of life:

We have called attention especially to this colony of Italians, that the public might know and aid an intended enterprise for educating them. Here they are, hundreds, of them, eager to learn, and growing up to be our fellow countrymen, in a heathenish ignorance.

That they were portrayed as “heathenish” was undoubtedly a reflection of prevailing Protestant biases; they are “all Catholics,” we are told, “but that would make no difference,


29 “Walks Among the New-York Poor; The Organ Grinders.”
as they want to learn.”

Through their missionary-like activities, Brace and other reformers sought to inculcate normative American values in children that were regarded as poor, Italian, Catholic Other. But the motives of the reform movement were not entirely without fault. As John Zucchi notes, the reformers who sought to curb the use of child street musicians did not object to the use of child labor *per se*, but rather the profession itself, which required little educational or vocational training. The Children’s Aid Society’s Italian School was one preferable option, but the employment of children in other skill-based professions was not necessarily deemed objectionable.

Furthermore, the writing of the reformers frequently revealed more about their own living conditions than that of their subject matter. Although Brace’s account emphasized the overcrowded living conditions of the colony, along with its “filth” and dirt “which has been collecting and hardening perhaps these fifty years,” the perspective of the immigrants may well have been different. For the Italians, many of whom who were migrant laborers, this living situation was perhaps only provisional, and allowed for them to save as much money as possible for themselves and their families still in Italy. The account, although well-intentioned in some ways, confirms Sturino’s contention that, “the immigrant—and

30 Ibid.

31 Elsewhere Brace frames his argument in purely nationalist terms, writing of the “dangerous influence of vice and ignorance and vice among our foreign population.” Brace, “School for the Organ-Grinders.”


33 Ibid., 113-114.

34 Brace, “School for the Organ Grinders.”
specifically the Italian—quarter was usually associated, in the minds of middle-class observers and reformers with dirt, disease, overcrowding, ignorance, immorality, and vice.\textsuperscript{35}

Despite the biases of Brace’s account, it provides useful details about the reception of street musicians. The children within the article are depicted as an enthusiastic and captive audience of the barrel organ, a trope that would later become standard within descriptions of organ grinders. Brace describes one such performance that unfolded within the confines of the colony:

So the organ is brought out, the wax figures uncovered, the children put where they can see them, and a polka is struck out. The children look on delighted, the man smoking gets up, fixes his hat ajaunt, and in the only space left vacant, a spot about one foot by two, in front of the fire, dances merrily to the measure; even the monkeys leave their apple-rinds and crawl out of the chimney, as if something were going on which might call for their attention also.\textsuperscript{36}

From the context of the article, it seems that the same children in the employ of the padrone are now also the ones enjoying the tunes of the hand organ. The wax figurines described by Brace were elaborately decorated, and functioned as an integral aspect of the performance that directly appealed to children’s sensibilities.\textsuperscript{37}

The choice of repertoire within the scene suggests that hand organ players were flexible in adapting to prevailing musical tastes, operating as vehicles of musical transmission in the era before recorded music. Although the colony is identified as overwhelmingly Italian, the use of the polka demonstrates that the performer conformed to

\textsuperscript{35} Franc Sturino, \textit{Forging the Chain}, 126-127.

\textsuperscript{36} “Walks Among the New-York Poor; The Organ Grinders.”

\textsuperscript{37} Brace describes the wax figures almost as if he is at a toy factory: “The sides of the room are lined with the little headless images, on which wax faces and arms are to be put.” Ibid.
prevailing musical tastes rather than resort merely to popular Italian idioms. Brace further identifies Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” as a tune also played by the organ grinder. The tune, composed two years earlier, was undoubtedly popular in New York’s minstrelsy shows. Thus, hand organs could reflect musical tastes even as they helped to propagate them.

**The Politics of Street Music**

Like their conservative counterparts, Charles Brace and other liberals agreed that street music was in need of reform. But the desire to change the status quo was not merely restricted to newspaper articles and letters to the editor. Along with discussion came tangible political action, and a series of mayoral administrations attempted to take the next logical step: the enactment of binding legal restrictions upon street musicians. The effect of these city ordinances, however, was often mixed, because of the difficulties inherent in legally restricting an entire class of musicians.

Although a succession of New York City’s mayors and city councils were urged to enact ordinances singling out street music, the most successful, if short lived, attempt took place during Hugh Grant’s mayoralty. Grant, a Democrat who held the office from 1889-1892, joined together with the Board of Alderman in 1890 to pass a blanket ordinance against street music of all kinds. The measure was specifically designed to target organ grinders and street bands. Wandering street bands had been increasing in numbers due to increased immigration from Germany, and it was intimated by the press that the musician’s union had

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strongly advocated for curtailing the presence of these non-union performers.\textsuperscript{39} The proposed ordinance was published in the \textit{New York Times} on October 30:

No person shall beat any drum or instrument for the purpose of attracting the attention of passengers on any street in the city of New York to any show of beasts or birds, or other things in said city, under the penalty of $10 for each offense; nor shall any person use, or perform with, or hire, procure, or abet any other person to use or perform with, any hand organ, or other musical or other instrument in any of the streets or public places in the city of New York, under a penalty of $10 for each offense.

The ordinance further exempted officially sanctioned music groups, clearly singling out street music as its target:

The provisions of this section shall apply only to itinerant musicians and side shows, and shall not be construed so as to affect any band of music, or organization, or musical society engaged in any military of civic parade, or in serenading, who shall comply with the laws of the State relating to parades in the city of New York, or to any musical performance conducted under a license from the proper municipal authority.\textsuperscript{40}

The controversial proposal was not universally supported, and set off a large number of responses from columnists, regular citizens, and the street musicians themselves. The \textit{New York Times} called attention to the measure’s harshness, questioning whether the children who happily gathered around the organ grinder could be charged with “abetting” the newly outlawed activity.\textsuperscript{41} A Board of Alderman’s meeting the following month was swamped with a deluge of organ grinders and other musicians, who were naturally concerned with their

\textsuperscript{39} One column cited the music unions as the primary cause of the legislation: “Labor, it appears, demands the suppression of the street bands and hand organs,” “Street Bands and Alderman,” \textit{New York Times}, October 31, 1889.


\textsuperscript{41} “Street Bands and Alderman.”
own plight. The mayor received a “unique collection” of letters and pleas from regular citizens, the majority of which supported the suspension of the ordinance. Their rationale, reprinted by the Times, contained a host of different reasons to support street music, including: its positive effect on the physical bodies of its listeners, its status as the favored music of the lower classes, and its sentimental association with childhood experience:

A physician asks that the music be allowed to go on because it cheers the sick. One philosopher points out that it would look very odd, when the city intends celebrating the quadri-centennial of Columbus’s big feat, to prevent his countrymen from grinding organs. One who signs himself Garibaldi Bismarck jumps on to the labor people because he says their motto is “An injury to one is the concern of all,” and yet they don’t want to have the street band or hand-organ people earn their living. A resident of Stuyvesant-square wrote the ablest letter of the day in favor of the organs. He based his arguments on the pleasure they gave the children. A little girl wrote herself about the pleasure the music gave herself and sister.

Facing strong opposition from its citizenry, as well as instrument manufacturers, the city council quickly revised the measure. Provisions were established to grant 300 licenses to hand organ players, with first priority given to blind or otherwise handicapped persons for whom grinding the organ was perhaps the only means with which they could support themselves. The licensing gave the administration some leverage to curtail the padrone

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system, since individual players were all required to show up in person to apply and submit
themselves to questioning. In addition, the introduction of a restricted playing schedule
mandating daytime-only performance hours allowed the authorities to address complaints
lodged by sleep-deprived urban denizens against the performers.

The impassioned response to the ordinance demonstrates the intensely political nature
of deliberations surrounding street music. The debate found its way in veiled as well as overt
ways into the political lexicon. Newspaper columnists were particularly fond of describing
rival newspapers as “organs” of parties or politicians, using the latent cultural associations of
the hand organ as a pun in order to lambaste both the politicians in question and the
newspapers that supported them.\textsuperscript{47} Thomas Nast, a famous political cartoonist who worked
for \textit{Harper’s Weekly}, was particularly effective at using the figure of the hand organ man and
his monkey to satirically roast his political opponents.\textsuperscript{48}

The cartoons by Nast are not only significant for their political value, but also
because their depiction of hand organs suggest caricatures about street music that must have
circulated widely within contemporary culture. One of the cartoons shows Whitelaw Reid,
editor of the \textit{New York Daily Tribune}, playing the part of the organ grinder, and Horace
Greeley as the organ grinder’s monkey begging for contributions (see Figure 1). Greeley had
preceded Reid as editor of the \textit{Tribune} before becoming a Presidential candidate for the

\textsuperscript{47} For examples of the hand organ’s use as a political metaphor, see “Political Organs,” \textit{New

\textsuperscript{48} For an overview of Nast’s work as a cartoonist for Harper’s Weekly, see Puran Singh
Khalsa, “Thomas Nast and Harper's Weekly, 1862-1886” (Ph.D. diss., University of
California, Santa Barbara, 1983).
Liberal Republican Party, and upon Reid’s accession, the paper had been quick to claim that it was “not an organ” of Greeley’s party. The sign on Reid’s hand organ, identified as the Tribune on the front, therefore reads, “This is not a hand organ,” ridiculing the veracity of Reid’s claim. The tune listed on the front of the hand organ is the “Bonny Blue Flag,” a choice that strongly aligns Reid and Greeley with the defunct Confederacy.

The cartoon further aligns the political intrigue with the common trope of a police officer warily looking upon an organ grinder as the scene unfolds. Suspicious of the performer, the officer looks as if he about to encourage Greeley to “move on” at any moment. The monkey who asks for alms—here his cup is marked “votes,” and he courts an audience of Tammany Hall Democrats—makes plain the common association of street music with begging.

A related Nast cartoon depicts Presidential candidate Samuel Tilden as the monkey, with Reid maintaining his role as the organ grinder (see Figure 2). The piece is a commentary upon Tilden’s policy views on public education. While the Republicans had advocated a federal policy of strict separation of church and state within the education system, a value supported by the virulently anti-Catholic Nast Tilden demurred from the proposal. Instead, he envisioned a weaker system whose organization could be determined by the individual states. The cartoon predicts a future scene in which Tilden has lost the


Figure 1. Whitelaw Reid and Horace Greeley as Organ Grinder and Monkey

Source: Harper’s Weekly, June 8, 1875
Figure 2. Whitelaw Reid and Samuel Tilden as Organ Grinder and Monkey

Source: Harper’s Weekly, November 20, 1875
election. To the right, the “Presidential Ash barrel for 1876” is filled with the dead bodies of
children.

The ash barrel, used by Mafiosi figures during this era for brutal murders of their
opponents, thus brings to mind latent connections between Italian identity, street music, and
crime. A group of children, elsewhere depicted as surrounding and swarming around organ
grinders, are shown in the background, safely ensconced under a school building marked
“Public School U.S.” Nast, one of the most gifted satirists of the nineteenth century,
contextualized the political currents of the day through the use of street musicians, who were
capable of sparking pitched conflict in New York. Taken together, these cartoons further
illuminate the negative social standing that organ grinders held in the nineteenth century.

“Grinding” out the Canon: Street Music and Musical Borrowing

Although extant accounts of street music provide a means of exploring their social
and political contexts, these accounts also further clarify the role that organ grinders, street
bands, and other musicians played in the transmission of music. We have already seen the
tensions that could exist between unionized musicians and their street counterparts, but the
individual composer’s relationship to street music was perceived as decidedly less
antagonistic. Indeed, to have one’s music played by the hand-organ was often considered to
be a sign of a composer’s success and popularity.

Street music was predominantly a non-written and mechanical tradition, thus
precluding a traditional musicological examination of scores and other artifacts that could
help to reify its historical existence. However, surviving accounts report a mixed repertoire
of Italian arias, minstrel songs, waltzes, polkas, and gospel hymns. In other words, many if
not all of the popular genres of the day were represented by street music.
An 1854 review of the newly released song “The Katy-Did Sing” by Thomas Baker, a composer and member of Louis Jullien’s orchestra, illustrates the role that the hand-organ played in gauging the success of the work: “The best thing Baker has done. The opening bars are not very original, but altogether it is good, and will we suspect, be on the hand-organ before long.” The song’s eventual appearance on the hand organ is thus equated with its quality and popular appeal. Another concert reviewer notes his prior knowledge of several tunes as a result of their performance by organ grinders:

The Music too, was more lively after the horns and trumpets got a little warmed up, and several of the tunes played were really stirring. Some of them we were already familiar with, having heard them on the hand-organ, and one, “The Grasshopper, or Katydid Melody,” we had frequently heard whistled, but never without a thrill of pleasure and patriotism.

In a review of a performance of Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor by the Lagrange opera troupe in 1855, an unnamed critic for the New York Times wrote of the opera, “Every one knows it by heart; the street organs grind out the principal airs, and the Ward Schools sing the choruses.” Hand organs were thus not merely music for the lower classes, but also played an unacknowledged role in transmitting music to those who did have access to concert music.


52 Emphasis is my own. “New Music,” New York Daily Times, January 12, 1854. Most of Thomas Baker’s extant scores were published some 20 years later. Judging by Baker’s close working relationship with Louis Jullien, the writer is most likely referring to Jullien’s own “Katydid Polka.” See Louis Jullien, Katydid Polka (New York: Unknown, 1853).


Street music’s ability to affect the body and the body politic was at once an ideological question as well as a social one. The diverging ideologies explored thus far, representing conflicting desires to integrate or separate Italian immigrants, were expounded upon by politicians, newspaper columnists, and regular citizens alike. Despite their differences, neither faction of the debate could claim to truly rise above the emerging stereotype of the street musician as exoticized Italian Other. This disquieting reality is not so much a failure to reconcile opposing ideas, as much as it is a confirmation of the swelling number of Italian immigrants whose arrival was palpably affecting the social fabric of the United States. Despite the comparative silence of these immigrants within the written historical record, they continued to play an outsized, albeit heavily mediated role in cultural constructions of street music. As Chapter 2 will demonstrate, professional composers were also keenly interested in representing and appropriating street musicians for their own needs, cultivating musical and textural tropes that took advantage of predominant stereotypes that aligned street music with Italian identity.
CHAPTER 2
“THAT MACARONI TWIST”: REPRESENTING THE STREET IN SONG

While the noise ordinance had become a favored tool of controlling street music in political circles, artists too were making decisions of control through the representation of such performers in their work. Although the depiction of street musicians has been explored within the context of literature and art history,¹ musical compositions have not yet been considered in a similar manner. Sheet music, a product that burgeoned in popularity and importance in the early twentieth century, both reflected and shaped the continuing conflict surrounding street music.

Songs about street music represent just a small portion of the thousands of sheet music compositions in circulation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The amount of sheet music exploded during the emergence of New York’s Tin Pan Alley at the turn of the century, further aided by the large expansion of piano use by members of the middle class.² It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many of the musical examples that take street music as their subject conform to the prevailing tenets of popular musical style, with its emphasis on strophic form with refrain and frequent use of dance idioms, including the polka and the waltz. The notion of sentimentality in song is likewise a topic that has been explored in broader musical studies, and further discussion


² For a historical overview of the piano’s popularity in the United States, see Craig Roell, The Piano in America, 1890-1940 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1989).
of it here should not be construed as ground breaking.\(^3\) By drawing upon compositions that take organ grinders and other street musicians as their subject, this study will explore how composers adapted such performers to suit the tastes and preferences of their audiences.

As a form of entertainment designed for consumption by middle class performers and audiences in domestic settings, sheet music addressed two chief complaints voiced against street music: namely, its presence on the street, and its negative association with the lower class. The process of representation symbolically effected the removal of the music from the street, changing what was often an unplanned listening experience into one of intention. Furthermore, sheet music offered the middle class a musical simulacrum in which to experience lower class performers. Audiences were encouraged to form an exaggerated conception of the performers that promoted the use of Italian ethnic stereotypes. Although these compositions reflected the tensions that existed between the native and immigrant classes, their biased portrayals did little to resolve such conflicts.

**“Hand Organ Polka”: Aspects of Musical Style**

Composers who sought to cultivate a recognizable street music style in their works tended to draw upon the popular genres of their day, especially dance idioms. The employment of styles such as the waltz and polka first took root in the mid-nineteenth century and can be seen as part of the broader rise of the dances as musical genres of enormous import. Military bands, street musicians, and composers were all enamored

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\(^3\) See, for example, Peter Rabinowitz’s discussion of sentimentality in the works of Gottschalk. Peter J. Rabinowitz, “‘With our Own Dominant Passions’: Gottschalk, Gender, and the Power of Listening,” *19th-Century Music* 16 (1993): 242-252.
with the lively, fleet-footed rhythms offered by these contrasting dances. A series of short piano pieces released in the 1850s by Mathias Philippi were some of the earliest compositions to suggest an implicit relationship between barrel organs and popular dance style. The pieces, whose titles were accentuated by Italianate names such as “Baccante; The Second Hand Organ Polka,” and “Tamiri, The Second Hand Organ Valse,” demonstrate that popular dance idioms were commonly understood to be a part of the repertoire of street musicians.

Aside from their descriptive titles, Philippi’s works are similar both in structure and style to other polkas, works known for their syncopated 2/4 meter. The composer’s “The Beautiful Hand Organ Polka,” for example, begins with an eighth-note upbeat, a rhythmic feature that became relatively common in polkas beginning in the 1850s. The piece begins with two contrasting eight-measure phrases, expanding into a more lyrical sixteen-measure phrase that is followed by the return of the initial eight-measure unit.

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7 Černušák, “Polka.”
shown in Example 1, the opening eight measures of the work employ a dotted eighth note accent on the second beat of each measure that displaces the weak accent. The large metrical imbalance subsequently created is eventually resolved by the cadential grouping of three eighth notes shown in measure 8.

Philippi’s work therefore has all the trappings of a standard polka, except for the publisher’s telling indication that the piece, along with the other “hand organ polkas,” is meant as an arrangement for piano. The composer’s other extant piano pieces have titles that include the waltz and polka, but they are simply marked “composed by M. Philippi.” That the piano was meant only to stand in for the hand organ within this specific sub-set of pieces suggests that performers and listeners had license to imagine the performance as a rendition of street music rather than merely another polka or waltz per se.

Philippi’s piano miniatures developed the referential means of alluding to street music through the established rhythmic and melodic conventions of dance. But as a texted genre, songs did not necessarily have to overtly draw upon these characteristics to

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See, for example, Mathias Philippi, *A Rose Without a Thorn* (New York: Firth, Pond, 1849); *The Greeting Waltz* (New York: Firth, Pond, 1850).
effectively represent street music. Along with textual references to organ grinders and other street musicians, songs did make frequent use of a waltz piano accompaniment. The Song was already an enormously important genre in the nineteenth century, but it rose to new heights with the increasing commercial clout of New York’s Tin Pan Alley in the 1890s and beyond. It is these later songs that will constitute the bulk of this survey.

Charles Neil Daniel’s 1905 song, “Niccolini,” demonstrates common musical and textual devices that song composers employed to signify the street. Within the piano accompaniment of the song, a repeating waltz figuration signifies the presence of the barrel organ as a character within the plot of the piece. The song tells the story of an organ grinder, Niccolini, who sells his organ in order to achieve respectability as a fruit salesman, thereby securing his beloved Antoinetta’s hand in marriage. Structured in strophic form with refrain, the song begins with a brief piano prelude that serves to establish the 3/4 meter of the waltz. In the beginning of the first stanza, when the narrator introduces the organ grinder (see Example 2), the waltz can be initially understood as the music which Niccolini is playing on his organ.

Although the character is described as halting his playing in the text, the strophic musical setting ensures that the waltz accompaniment of the hand organ remains strongly associated with Niccolini. One can take the Italian out of organ grinding, so it seems, but

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seems, but not the organ grinder out of the Italian. In the end, Niccolini is able to leave behind his past history as an organ grinder in pursuit of more respectable social standing. But from the perspective of the narrator’s gaze, the tunes of the hand organ continue unabated, an indelible reminder of the presence of stereotype.

“I play de’ org’ so sweet-a”: Italian Dialect and Stereotype

Within the conventions of song, of course, music was not the only means by which composers and lyricists could indulge in ethnic or social stereotypes. The stylized manner in which the text was constructed betrays several methods commonly used to depict an Italian immigrant’s English dialect. These strategies included, but were not limited to: dropping the final syllables of some words, adding an ancillary vowel to the
ends of other words, and substituting the voiced dental plosive consonant “d” for the voiced dental fricative “th.” The refrain of “Niccolini” illustrates several of these methods in action. Here, Antoinetta implores Niccolini to give up his hand organ in favor of the more respectable profession of selling fruit, or as she calls it, selling “de grape an’ banan’”:

Oh, Niccolini, eeny, eeny, I’ll be your Queenie, eenie, eenie, 
If you will sell a de grape an’ banan’, Be big Italio beesiness man, 
Oh, Niccolini, eeny, eeny, Don’t be so meany, eany, eany, 
If you will shak a dat junk a de org’an’ de monk, Well I’ll marry you right away.  

Within this imagined dialect, for example, the two-syllable verbs “sell” and “shake” are pronounced “sell-a” and “shak-a,” monkey is clipped to “monk,” and “the” and “that” are modified to “de” and “dat.”

Even songs that generally avoided the use of accented English could not entirely abstain from indulging in ethnic color. Walter Donaldson’s 1916 song “When Verdi Plays the Hurdy Gurdy,” despite its colorful title, employs standard English in both stanzas of the two-strophe song. The “Verdi” of the piece’s title refers to street musician Tony Verdi, although the character’s name is an obvious allusion to Giuseppe Verdi, whose operas were frequently heard on hand organs during this era.  

The song is at first declaimed without dialect, although the final line of the first stanza foreshadows a more

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10 The phenomenon of substituting "d" for "th" is known as TH-Stopping. Roxy Harris and Ben Rampton, *The Language, Ethnicity and Race Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 317-318.

11 Moret, *Niccolini*.

12 Although the hurdy gurdy is in fact a different instrument than the barrel organ commonly used by organ grinders, the term was used more or less interchangeably during this era.
dance-like melody in the refrain that is described as “That Macaroni Twist,” with the operative word “twist” being used as a double entendre to connote both the shape of pasta and dancing. Halfway through the refrain, the narrator switches into a more heavily accented description of the organ grinder’s monkey:

The monk’, he snap the fingers, like the ragga singers
Beppo Beppo, do the one a steppo, With Rose Marie
You feel a bad, you feel a sad you feel a much a pain,
and quick a just a like a dis, you feel a glad again,
When Verdi plays the Hurdy gurdy Down in little Italy.\(^{13}\)

The racist textual comparison of the monkey with ragtime singers is paired musically with a syncopated meter that further imbues the song with a rich sense of ethnic stereotype (see Example 3). The ragtime style, which displayed an uneven mixture of condescension and respect in framing blacks as an exotic, African Other, is thus related intertextually with a similar process of alterity that was taking place within representations of street music. James Brockman’s 1908 song “My Fluff-a De Ruff” also takes the hand organ man as its subject, and its use of heavily-accented English demonstrates how dialect was used to set immigrant characters apart from the native-born population. The song continues the story begun in the composer’s 1907 work “Marianina,” which was also performed by the same persona, an Italian character named Tony.\(^{14}\) Having moved on from Marianina, who, we are told, has run off with an Irish


actor to join a burlesque show, Tony sets his sights on a Broadway actress with the stage name Fluff de Ruff. Tony, whose profession was not specified in the former song, is depicted in the latter song as a barrel organ man. This choice provides the audience a
stock profession with which to associate Tony; it also gives the character a background story that explains why he is milling around outside of burlesque and Broadway shows. The patrons of these shows would have included large crowds of well-to-do citizens, an ideal location for an ambitious street musician. In broken English, Tony explains how he first encountered Ms. de Ruff:

    I tell a you how Fluff de Ruff I meet, I play de org’ so sweet a on her street, she say, “for me you play so nice de org’, I make for you de mon’ like Ping Pong Morg.”

“Ping Pong Morg” is undoubtedly a reference to wealthy banker and industrialist James Pierpont Morgan, who was perhaps the most famous American of his era. Although Italian street musicians perhaps lacked the cultural fluency to know of Morgan, the lampooning of his regal sounding middle name shows that despite the appropriation of an Italian character within the song, it was largely a product made by and for middle class sensibilities.

**Eloping with the Organ Man: Male Insecurity, Female Desire**

Although Brockman’s songs portrayed the organ grinder as spurned by an unsympathetic female, a far more common variation of this trope positioned the street musician as the interloper, rather than victim, of romantic male-female relationships. These tales, although allegorical in nature, touched on middle class male insecurities and acted as a cautionary tale for straying females. Within this gendered fantasy, the female lover runs off with a street musician, leaving behind a cuckolded man to wonder what

went wrong. In each example, the male’s underlying fear of abandonment is judged rational and therefore justified. The female’s infatuation, on the other hand, is ultimately deemed inchoate. She gains the affection of the street musician, but only at the cost of her economic status and social desirability.

Although these tales were largely fictive, newspaper accounts provide at least one actual example of a wife eloping with a street musician. The *Brooklyn Daily Eagle* describes the turn of events that took place in 1876:

A man appealed to a Justice to arrest his wife for eloping with a peripatetic musician, who had been lodged in the house over night and who had remained in the house two days at the request of his wife to play and sing for her. The music and the musician both together captivated the prosaic man’s wife and she eloped with the grinder. When last heard she was tramping the road with the delighted scamp, carrying the organ on her back, while he trudged patiently beside her with a monkey in his arms.\(^\text{16}\)

An early example of this trope can be found in a song sheet from the 1860s entitled “The Peanut Gal,” in which a black narrator tells the story of how a girl who runs a peanuts stand opts for the love of an organ grinder instead of a policeman with a stable and respectable career. After she falls in love with a local policeman, she has a change of heart. The narrator describes her decision to transfer her affections to the local organ grinder:

She vowed she’d love him ever more,  
And ne’er from him would stray,  
But she shook him and left wid an organ  
Grinder, the boys called him old dog Tray.  
They give curbstone concerts on rainy days,

The song deepens the street musician’s connection to the minstrel repertoire. “Old Dog Tray” was a popular song by Stephen Foster that celebrated the faithfulness of his canine companion, Tray. That the name of the song is used as slang for the musician’s name suggests that this well-known tune was heard frequently, and that the children in the story expected it to be played. It is also a back-handed compliment: they are celebrating the organ grinder as a faithful friend, while also comparing him to a dog.

The song provides a humorous explanation for the general animus of policemen toward street musicians. The policeman, while occupying a well-paying, respectable social role as guardian of the community, is nevertheless incapable of managing his own personal life. In contrast, the organ grinder, whose erratic salary was meager and whose profession was held in ill repute, successfully woos the girl through the seductive power of his music. In the end, the policeman can eventually enjoy the rewards of his comfortable lifestyle, but the girl in the story is less fortunate. Her health compromised by the poor conditions of the street, she is left with no recourse to rectify her situation.

Another song released by the same publisher takes the German brass band as its subject. The narrator describes how his wife, Susanna, would take a strong interest in the street musicians who would stop by while he was at work. The man is particularly


18 Stephen Collins Foster, *Old Dog Tray* (New York: Firth, Pond, 1853).
alarmed at one member of the band, who “used to wink in a most improper manner.”

The narrator returns home to chide his wife for her flirtations, only to discover that she had already run off with the “German flageolet.” Once again, the conclusion of the song metes out karmic justice along gendered lines:

Now, this happy loving couple did not love long:
for, ere they were a fortnight older,
They had a jolly row, when the German flageolet went
and ‘listed for a Yankee soldier.
On the field of glory, he got shot in the back:
but why should I now be caring?
For, the foreign ragamuffin he’s a clay-cold corpus,
and Susannah has to go out charing!19

The resentful suspicions the narrator harbored about his wife are thus portrayed as justified. The wife’s voice, however, remains silent. Having given herself over to the passion and power of music, she must now work to clean the houses of others as a maid. The power of the male gaze thus confirms the perceived wisdom of masculine identity, even while framing the feminine as impulsively responding to the crudeness of basal instincts. As the narrator of another song notes: “But to mourn any more for a girl like that, I should only be a dunce.”20

Of Monkeys, Moustaches, and Children: Illustrating Sheet Music

The rise of Tin Pan Alley also heralded a new way of marketing and selling music to the masses. The introduction of highly decorative cover art was a new element crucial to this success. The iconic imagery of an organ grinder and his monkey, in particular,


served as a colorful means of easily framing street music for the masses. Although some covers made use of photography to achieve a modicum of realism in portraying street musicians, other covers opted instead for overtly exaggerated illustrations. With a mischievous grin and a thick, curling moustache, the exotic organ man could be as much of a visual spectacle as he was a musical or textual one. His capuchin monkey assistant often wore a costume as decorative as his own, the simian appeal for loose change now reimagined as an appeal for potential customers to buy sheet music.

The printed edition of the 1906 song, “The Hurdy Gurdy Man,” demonstrates how some covers integrated photography within their artistic approach (see Figure 3). The cover of the song, published by composer and vaudeville star Gus Edwards, is designed to appeal to a younger audience, as the header reads, “Dedicated to the music loving boys and girls of America.” The “children” in his cover are not actually boys and girls, but vaudeville actors that were part of his revue called School Boys and School Girls. The printed sheet music therefore served as cross-promotional advertising for his vaudeville show. The cover further indicates that the song was performed “with great success” by his troupe. Although a street musician is the title character of the piece, he is relegated to the background of the picture on the right-hand side. In the foreground of the picture, four young couples embrace affectionately, their books suggesting a school setting. A single female student stands in the middle of the street scene, her carefree manner betrayed by a tilted head and a relaxed, exaggerated body posture. Although the cover enhances the imagined purity of adolescence, it is the aural presence of the organ

Figure 3. The Cover of “The Hurdy Gurdy Man”

Figure 4. The Cover of “The Sidewalks of New York”

Note: The song dates to 1894. This edition was published in 1914.

grinder that helps to inspire the innocence of young love.

The cover for the 1914 edition of Charles Lawlor and James Blake’s song, “The Sidewalks of New York,” a tune sometimes referred to as the unofficial anthem of New York City, functions as a paean to the sentimentality engendered by childhood experience even as its artistic rendering is less concerned with elements of realism (see Figure 4). Against the relatively drab background of the tenements, a colorful scene in the foreground of the cover shows the organ man surrounded by his adoring crowd of children. Here, the gaunt organ grinder is given an elongated moustache, marking him as Italian Other. From atop its perch on the barrel organ, the monkey surveys the scene, gazing upon the children. A boy to the left accompanies the music with cymbals as several other children dance along and a newsboy listens as he sells his wares. The depiction eschews commercialist trappings, as no parents are present to provide the organ man with his hoped for compensation.

Charles Kassel Harris’ “The Organ Grinder’s Serenade” synthesizes both the visual and musical approaches that have heretofore been discussed. Its evocative cover art aimed to endow the sheet music with an air of authentic photorealism (see Figure 5). The musical and textual content of the song included the stylized use of the waltz and tropes related to female and childhood experience. A series of photographs on the cover convey the basic plot elements of the story. A child who in better health had enjoyed the tunes of a local organ grinder has fallen sick. The mother invites the musician into her home in order comfort the child with a series of familiar tunes.

The song mitigates the negative connotation of street music in several ways. By inviting both organ grinder and his tunes into the domestic sphere, the mother lessens
Figure 5. The Cover of Charles Harris’ “The Organ Grinder’s Serenade”

the sting of street music as an unintended listening experience. Contrary to the belief that street noises had deleterious effects on the health of the sick and infirm, the song instead proposes the exact opposite: that street music could improve health, or at the very least, assuage some of its psychological effects.

Perhaps the most significant feature of the music is the method in which Harris quotes three of his own songs in the refrain, a self-assured act of promotion cloaked in the guise of sentimentality. The refrain serves as the organ grinder’s performance for the sick child, and therefore acts as a performance within a performance (see Example 4). Harris first quotes the refrain of his most famous song, “After the Ball is Over” (see Example 5), pairing the descending melodic contours of the first four measures of its chorus with a newly composed four-measure response that ascends melodically. He then interpolates the refrain melodies of “Creep, Baby, Creep” and “While the Dance Goes On” (see Examples 6 and 7), transposing them all into G Major and providing a common waltz accompaniment throughout that integrates the separate tunes into a unified, coherent whole. Adept at generating a strong sense of nostalgia and sentimentality, “Organ Grinder’s Serenade” creates a compelling illusion of security that is at odds with many other portrayals of street music that accentuated ethnic and class stereotypes.

“Organ Grinder’s Serenade” derives its powerful sentimentality not only from well-crafted musical quotation and heartbreaking prose, but also paradoxically from the well-worn tropes about street music that it eschews. By diminishing some elements of these tropes—which included the use of exaggerated dialect, the notion of street music as weakening female identity, and a proclivity to make frequent ethnic references to
moustaches and noodles—street music could be re-interpreted in a less noxious, stereotypical manner.

In general, however, the biases of composers were similar to those of their audiences. Responding to the perceived vocational, linguistic, and ethnic alterity of organ grinders and other street musicians, composers often inflamed prejudice and misunderstanding rather than assuaging it. Similar to the broader social debate about street music, compositions that represented the performers reflected the deepening concerns of the middle class about Italian immigration. Moreover, as music about music, these songs played a vital role in shaping musical perceptions of organ grinders, in a different manner than contemporary newspaper articles or visual depictions could accomplish. The songs reveal a class of composers and audiences who were prone to ethnic prejudice and who, despite their literacy, understood little about the lower class they parodied.

CHORUS

"After the ball is over," softly the organ did play,

"After the dancers leaving,"

"Please Mister come every day," "Creep baby creep,

mama will surely catch you,"
Example 4. Continued

Creep, ba - by, creep, mam - ma is near to

watch you,” "While the mu - sic is play - ing.

was the next strain played
Example 5. Charles Harris, “After the Ball is Over,” mm. 73-83. Courtesy of American Historic Sheet Music Collection, Duke University.
Example 6. Charles Harris, “Creep baby, Creep,” mm. 50-65. Courtesy of Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music

"Creep baby creep, mam-ma will sure-ly catch you, Creep, ba-by, creep, mam-ma is near to watch you,"

Composer: Charles Harris
Arranger: [Details not provided]
Used with permission from the Lester S. Levy Collection of Sheet Music.
CHAPTER 3
CHARLES IVES AND TRANSCENDENTAL IMAGINATION: RECONSIDERING FROM HANOVER SQUARE NORTH

By the early twentieth century, the number of street musicians had begun to decline. Despite their gradual fading from the urban soundscape, organ grinders continued to be portrayed in popular song, and had even begun to crop up in art music. In Puccini’s opera *Il Tabaro*, premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1918, several characters danced along to the music of an organ grinder in the opening scene.\(^1\) One of the characters depicted in George Chadwick’s verismo opera, *The Padrone* (1912), was a tambourine girl, a street performer traditionally paired with hand organs. These depictions came during a period in which middle class audiences were less likely to have encountered organ grinders on a daily basis, suggesting that the musicians were increasingly viewed through the interpretive lens of personal memory and collective imagination.

Although scholars have not yet begun to fully assess the representation of street musicians within art music, one such work, Charles Ives’ *From Hanover Square North, at the End of a Tragic Day, the Voice of the People Again Arose*,\(^2\) may benefit from an increased contextual understanding of the barrel organ that appears within its program.\(^3\)

\(^1\) A similar scene occurs within Stravinsky’s ballet *Petrushka* (1911), in which two girls dance for a crowd of people as an organ grinder plays a popular French song.

\(^2\) Hereafter referred to simply as *From Hanover Square North*.

\(^3\) Unlike the sheet music discussed in Chapter 2, there is little evidence to suggest that *From Hanover Square North* was popular within the composer’s own lifetime. As recently as 1995, J. Peter Burkholder described the work as “relatively unfamiliar and seldom heard.” Nevertheless, an examination of Ives’ work can affirm the importance of organ grinders within the historical imagination of composers and audiences of early
Originally written to memorialize reactions to the sinking of the Lusitania, *From Hanover Square North* has recently begun to attract more scholarly attention within Ives scholarship. Interpretations of the work’s program—a striking tableau of grief-stricken commuters in New York City who spontaneously begin to sing along to the tune of an organ grinder—have typically stressed the importance of the commuters as the “voice of the people,” while consigning the organ grinder to the aural and visual background of the scene.

This chapter will respond to recent musicological studies of *From Hanover Square North* and assert the aural parity of the organ grinder within both the program and the music it inspired. Ives’ idealized conception of the organ grinder was probably influenced by a prevailing cultural attitude that responded to the declining fortunes of twentieth-century New York. James Peter Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes: Charles Ives and the Uses of Musical Borrowing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 262.


street musicians by eliciting a measure of sympathy that sometimes bordered on the nostalgic. Ives own personal response to organ grinders may have been further informed by his familiarity with literary descriptions of the musicians found in the work of transcendental authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau. This new historical and literary understanding of the program for From Hanover Square North can in turn lead to a new interpretation of Ives’ musical response to tragedy, one in which the whirling conflagration of out-of-tune, “singing” instruments represents a musical hybrid combining the chorus of commuters with the music of the organ grinder.

Ives’s allegorical account of From Hanover Square appeared in his Memos, a collection of programs for many of his mature works. In his version of the story, Ives arrived at a commuter train station in New York City on the night of the horrific sinking of the Lusitania by a German U-Boat on May 7, 1915. As he waited for the “L” train to arrive, Ives claimed to witness a group of commuters spontaneously start to sing a tune provided by a nearby hand organ, the gospel hymn “In The Sweet Bye and Bye”:

I remember, going downtown to business, the people on the streets and on the elevated train had something in their faces that was not the usual something. (That it meant war is what the faces said, if the tongues didn’t.) Leaving the office and going uptown about six o’clock, I took the Third Avenue “L” at Hanover Square Station. As I came on the platform, there was quite a crowd waiting for the trains, which had been blocked lower down, and while waiting there, a hand-organ or hurdy-gurdy was playing in the street below. Some workmen sitting on the side of the tracks began to whistle the tune, and others began to sing or hum the refrain. A workman with a shovel over his shoulder came on the platform and joined in the chorus, and the next man, a Wall Street banker with white spats and a cane, joined in it, and finally it seemed to me that everybody was singing the tune, and they didn’t seem to be singing in fun, but as a natural outlet for what their feelings had been going through all day. There was a feeling of dignity all through this. The hand-organ man seemed to sense this and wheeled the organ nearer the platform and kept it up fortissimo (and the chorus sounded as though every man in New York must be joining in it.) Then the first train came in and everybody crowded in, and the song gradually died out, but the effect on the crowd still showed. Almost nobody talked—the people acted
as though they might be going out of a church service. In going uptown, occasionally little groups would start singing or humming a tune. Ives is colorful in his description of the eclectic group of commuters, and it is easy to see why scholars have concentrated their interest on this appealing panorama of working men at the expense of the “hand-organ man.” Although the aural presence of the organ grinder is central to the initiation of community singing, he is relegated to the visual background of the scene until wheeling the organ closer to the crowd. He is never assigned any sort of visual appearance, and maintains a somewhat benign physical presence while providing the listeners a “natural outlet” to release their emotions through song.

Scholars who enjoy less cultural fluency than Ives’ own readership have likely misinterpreted what appears at its surface to be a vague description of the organ grinder. Simply put, Ives did not provide a more elaborate description of the musician because he likely did not need to. Most readers in the 1920s would have readily subscribed to commonly held cultural assumptions that cast organ grinders as Italian, Catholic immigrants of the lower class. They would have therefore grasped the implicit distinctions of religion, class, and ethnicity that the program made in separating the organ grinder from the native-born, Protestant commuters of the upper classes. The musical

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7 Ives, Memos, 92-93.

8 I am grateful to Denise Von Glahn for suggesting this interpretive possibility. Denise Von Glahn, conversation with the author, February 12, 2010.

9 According to Kirkpatrick, Essays was privately printed by Ives during the 1920s. Memos, 11.

10 It can be inferred that the commuters are Protestant by virtue of their status as members of New York’s upper classes, as well as their pre-existing knowledge of “In The Sweet
and extra-musical significance of the barrel organ within Ives’ program may therefore be more significant than post-modern scholarship currently assumes, and is further elucidated by the historical conditions of street music in early twentieth century New York City.

By 1915, organ grinders had become somewhat of a rare sight in the city’s streets. An organization calling itself the Society for the Prevention of Unnecessary Noise was organized in 1907, with the express goal of diminishing the noisy annoyances of modern life, including “the whirr and bang of flat-wheeled surface cars, the shriek and rumble of the elevated expresses, the honk of the automobile,” as well as “the various discordant street cries, tooting of whistles, yells of street vendors.” Under the leadership of Mrs. Isaac L. Rice, the organization quickly pushed for a new noise ordinance to regulate the unsavory sounds of the street.

The efforts of the Society, along with those of other prominent backers, led the City Council to pass a new ordinance on June 29, 1909. Broadly worded, it restricted the use of musical instruments on the street and could even be read as banning the practice of street music outright. The New York Times described the strict new law:

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Bye and Bye.” Lawrence Kramer similarly interprets the commuters as representative of Protestant values. He views the program as a metaphorical triumph of “old-time, rural, Protestant America” over “modern urban life.” See Lawrence Kramer, Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 190-194.


The ordinance provides that no peddler, vendor, or huckster who plies a trade or calling of whatsoever nature on the streets and thoroughfares of the city shall blow or use any horn or other instrument, nor make any improper noise tending to disturb the peace or quiet of a neighborhood, for the purpose of directing attention to his wares.\footnote{13}{“Must Make Less Noise,” \textit{New York Times}, June 30, 1909.}

Due to the increasing burden of legal sanctions, hand organs, tambourines, and other street instruments noticeably declined, although they did not completely disappear.\footnote{14}{The broadly worded ordinance does not seem to have been successful in banning street music outright, but it does indicate that organ grinders faced a harsh legal environment. Organ grinders did not entirely disappear from New York City until 1936, when Mayor La Guardia discontinued their licensing.}

Noting the dramatic decrease in street music by 1920, a reporter for the \textit{New York Times} remarked:

\begin{quote}
Possibly because of the rivalry of the phonograph, the mechanical piano, the automobile and the movies... it is a melancholy fact that the hurdy gurdy is disappearing from our city streets. A little while and the hand-organ and the street piano may be only a memory.\footnote{15}{Denys Wortman, “Last of the Organ Grinders,” \textit{New York Times}, August 1, 1920.}
\end{quote}

Four years later, another article lamented street music’s growing absence by noting its fictive presence in popular culture:

\begin{quote}
Pictures and plays may still portray the idealized organ grinder, olive-skinned native of the Mediterranean, flowing of whiskers as well as of tie, with his organ suspended from velveteen shoulders and a costumed monkey perched on top. But for the streets—no more horny-handed sons of the portable organ, no more wheezing of one-legged instruments that miss more than they hit, no more shrieks of glee at the antics of monkeys whose business it is to collect what they can.\footnote{16}{“Organ Grinders and Monkeys have Lately Become Extinct,” \textit{New York Times}, November 26, 1924.}
\end{quote}

City dwellers, who were now legally protected from street music’s aural threat, had begun to move away from traditional fears of “horny-handed” organ grinders and
embraced the musicians as a fictive rather than a real presence in their neighborhoods. Increasingly liberated from the practical drawbacks of barrel organs, New York’s urban denizens could now reminisce about the street music with a growing sense of nostalgia. For Charles Ives, a composer who had complained of a growing “commercialism, with its influence tending toward mechanization,”17 this softening of the prevailing cultural attitude toward street music may help explain his receptiveness toward organ grinding, a fundamentally mechanical musical idiom. But the idealistic composer seems to have also drawn upon sympathetic descriptions of the performers within literature to further satiate his vivid musical imagination.

Ives’ intimate familiarity with the works of transcendental authors Nathaniel Hawthorne and Henry David Thoreau suggests that he drew upon their portrayal of organ grinders as performers uninterested in commercial gain. Thoreau’s Journal, published in 1906 and excerpted in The Atlantic Monthly, may well have provided Ives with a model of barrel organs as beacons of musical altruism. Describing his encounter with an organ grinder on May 27, 1851, Thoreau wrote:

May 27. I saw an organ-grinder this morning before a rich man’s house, thrilling the street with harmony, loosening the very paving-stones and tearing the routine of life to rags and tatters, when the lady of the house shoved up a window and in a semi-philanthropic tone inquired if he wanted anything to eat... It seemed to me that the music suggested that the recompense should be as fine as the gift. It would be much nobler to enjoy the music, though you paid no money for it, then to presume always a beggarly relation. It is after all, perhaps, the best instrumental music that we have.18

17 Ives, Memos, 54

Thoreau’s portrayal of the musician as essentially “noble” is extremely similar to the organ grinder in Ives’ program who “seemed to sense” the “feeling of dignity” his music provided to the inspired commuters. Moreover, Thoreau’s description of the hand organ as “the best instrumental music that we have” made a distinction between artistic quality and what might be termed experiential quality. Ives made a similar distinction when he wrote of *From Hanover Square*: “The last movement, in my opinion, is one of the best—that’s not the same as saying that it’s any too good—it’s simply saying that, as far as I’m concerned, I think it’s one of the best that I’ve done.”

Thoreau was not the only Transcendental author who influenced Ives’ aesthetic of music. The composer frequently mentioned Nathaniel Hawthorne as another source of inspiration. Ives was particularly knowledgeable about the author’s famous novel, *The House of Seven Gables*. In one scene of the book, Hawthorne included an extended description of an organ grinder as, observed by the characters Clifford and Phoebe:

an article. The article also notes that the Thoreau selection had been printed in *The Atlantic* the previous year. See “Music in America,” *The Outlook*, September 16, 1905; Ives, *Essays Before a Sonata*, 201.

19 Ives, *Memos*, 93.


21 Ives, *Memos*, 92.

22 In *Essays Before a Sonata*, Ives described Hawthorne as “so dripping wet with the supernatural, the phantasmal, the mystical, so surcharged with adventures... that one unconsciously finds oneself thinking of him as a poet of greater imaginative impulse than Emerson or Thoreau. He was not a greater poet, possibly, than they—but a greater artist.” *Essays Before a Sonata*, 39.

23 Boatwright notes that Ives’s allusion to “Phoebe’s Garden” in *Essays Before a Sonata* refers to the character of Phoebe Pyncheon in Hawthorne’s novel. This establishes his knowledge of the work. See *Essays Before a Sonata*, 42.
One of those Italian boys (who are rather a modern feature of our streets) came along with his barrel-organ, and stopped under the wide and cool shadows of the elm. With his quick professional eye he took note of the two faces watching him from the arched window, and, opening his instrument, began to scatter its melodies abroad.... In all their variety of occupation—the cobbler, the blacksmith, the soldier, the lady with her fan, the topper with his bottle, the milkmaid sitting by her cow—this fortunate little society might truly be said to enjoy a harmonious existence, and to make life literally a dance. The Italian turned a crank; and, behold! Every one of these small individuals started into the most curious vivacity. The cobbler wrought upon a shoe; the blacksmith hammered his iron; the soldier waved his glittering blade; the lady raised a tiny breeze with her fan; the jolly topper swigged lustily at his bottle; a scholar opened his book with eager thirst for knowledge... all at the same turning of a crank.

Possibly some cynic, at once merry and bitter, had desired to signify, in this pantomimic sense, that we mortals, whatever our business or amusement—however serious, however trifling—all dance to one identical tune, and in spite of our ridiculous activity, bring nothing finally to pass. For the most remarkable aspect of the affair was, that, at the cessation of the music, everybody was petrified, at once, from the most extravagant life into a dead torpor.24

Like Ives’ program, Hawthorne’s scene is populated with characters of different classes and backgrounds, who have their distinctions mitigated by the shared tune introduced by the organ grinder.25 The hand-organ is received by the audience not with a mixture of pleasure and scorn, but with the observation that “all dance to one tune.”26 Thus, despite the organ grinder’s social, ethnic, and professional alterity, through his music he becomes capable of expressing universality.


25 Von Glahn suggests a different, but similar literary model for Ives’ program, Walt Whitman’s poem “I Hear America Singing.” The Sounds of Place, 291.

26 Hawthorne, The House of the Seven Gables, 235.
If we are to adhere faithfully to Ives’ sonic dictum that we hear his music “as though every man in New York” were performing it,\(^{27}\) then the organ grinder must by definition be included as one of the “voice of the people.” Within this revised approach to the program of *From Hanover Square*, the organ grinder can be seen and heard alongside the commuters as part of the diverse, emotional tableau of grief that took place on the day of the sinking of the Lusitania. Through music, the organ grinder became a symbol of universal grief for commuters, whose wheezy, out-of-tune singing in turn mirrored the aural effect of a barrel organ.

Like many works in his oeuvre, Ives organized the music of *From Hanover Square* through a process in which small pieces of the main theme “In the Sweet Bye and Bye” (see Example 8) are heard throughout the orchestra and slowly coalesce into a more coherent final statement near the conclusion of the work. J. Peter Burkholder has labeled this formal design within Ives’ music as cumulative, which he describes as follows:

*The coming together of individuals in a shared group feeling is symbolized by the gradual coming together of a theme, in which all of the fragments and variants heard over the course of the movement are still present, their individuality intact, but are merged in a common expression of feeling.*\(^{28}\)

There is therefore no overt musical reference to the organ grinder at the beginning of the piece as might be expected.\(^{29}\) Instead, a brief, chant-like chorus that uses the opening text of the *Te Deum* operates as a vocal introduction to the piece, settling into the reciting tone

\(^{27}\) Ives, *Memos*, 93.

\(^{28}\) Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes*, 264.

F in a relatively low tessitura. Denise Von Glahn has argued that the choral passage signifies a “human presence” amidst a static aural background meant to represent the noise of New York City. However, by evoking an early Christian hymn associated with Catholic ritual, Ives may well have intended the chorus as an aural and religious antipode to the Protestant hymn tune that soon begins to saturate the work’s texture. The allusion to the *Te Deum* may even have been a way for Ives to programmatically signal the arrival of the Catholic organ grinder without quoting “In The Sweet Bye and Bye” and thus compromising the integrity of work’s cumulative form.

Example 8. “In The Sweet Bye and Bye,” mm. 9-16.


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30 Burkholder identifies the melody as a “variant of the second Gregorian psalm tone.” *All Made of Tunes*, 264.

31 Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place*, 94.

32 Burkholder made a similar point when he suggested Ives’ quotation of “Massa’s in de Cold Ground” within *From Hanover Square* operated as a “musical symbol for his presence among the crowd.” *All Made of Tunes*, 265.
That Ives meant to place religious experience at the sonic foreground of *From Hanover Square North* becomes clear from his use of the *Te Deum* and “In The Sweet Bye and Bye,” but it was not so much that Ives’ use of religious music could “reconcile human beings and place”, it was that his music effected the reconciliation of human beings to *each other*. The whirling sound mass of “In The Sweet Bye and Bye” at measure 102 that marks the culmination of cumulative form thus sonically unifies the organ grinder and the commuters of Hanover Square Station.

The hymn tune, quoted here in six different keys simultaneously, evoked not only “the effect of many voices singing from many different directions,” it also approximated the noise of the barrel organ, an instrument known for its out-of-key, rhythmically unstable musical qualities. It is as if the commuters had become a massive barrel organ that, in Ives’ words, “kept it up fortissimo.” Thus, in sonic terms, the commuters echoed the organ grinder, but the organ grinder was also echoing the commuters.

In response to the tragedy of the Lusitania, Ives figuratively and musically aligned the organ grinder and the commuters in order to attenuate the divisions that separated New Yorkers from each other. The “voice of the people” therefore included Catholic and Protestant, foreign and native-born, lower class and upper class, musician and businessman. That musicologists have neglected to acknowledge the musical and extra-

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33 Von Glahn, *The Sounds of Place*, 93.

34 Sinclair, *Orchestral Set No. 2*, vi.

35 Burkholder, *All Made of Tunes*, 265.

36 Ives, *Memos*, 93.
musical significance the organ grinder brought to bear within Ives’ work is perhaps a symptom of Ives mythology clouding a deeper historical understanding of his time and place. But it also suggests a discomfort with a class of street musicians who, lacking scores and other verifiable musical artifacts, have been all too easily neglected within music scholarship. Understanding the organ grinder’s “voice” within *From Hanover Square North* therefore not only allows us to better appreciate Ives’ rich musical imagination, but it can also provide further insight into a class of street musicians that continue to remain misunderstood.
CHAPTER 4

STREET MUSIC IN CHARLES CADMAN’S THE WILLOW TREE

The use of street musicians as subject matter within Tin Pan Alley songs and concert music reflected a continuing preoccupation with the demographic changes wrought by Italian immigration. While Charles Ives’ *From Hanover Square North* was reasonably successful in mitigating religious, ethnic, and class-based difference through music, its idealistic message of reconciliation was by no means universal. Many other representations of street music promoted a lasting suspicion of Italian culture and customs, a practice that lasted into the 1930s with the rise of new media, including radio and cinema.

This chapter will explore how Italian identity and street music were represented within Charles Cadman’s *The Willow Tree*, a one-act opera that premiered to millions of listeners on NBC Radio in 1932. Although the work is often remembered in historiography for its novelty as the first opera commissioned by a major radio network, such a moniker reveals little about the social milieu of NBC Radio in the 1920s and 1930s, nor does it describe the actual music or plot of *The Willow Tree*, including its notable depiction of a street musician character named Pietro. However, this chapter will first demonstrate that live performances, commissions, and arrangements of operas were all frequently broadcast by NBC Radio in the 1920s and 1930s. These performances, which included other operas composed by Charles Cadman, were not at all unusual, and further call into question the view of *The Willow Tree* as merely a historical curiosity.

In *The Willow Tree*, the character of Pietro is portrayed as a street musician both through his unbalanced personal behavior, as well as his association with the well-known Italian folk song “O Sole Mio.” Although neither Pietro nor his daughter, Donella, are
musically connected to the barrel organ per se, their unstable demeanor and violent actions demonstrate that the traditional trope of Italian street musicians as a corrosive influence detrimental to native-born Americans continued to have relevance to general audiences well into the 1930s. Thus, the depiction of Pietro within The Willow Tree provides a new, content-driven means of situating Cadman’s opera within historiography.

**Opera at NBC Radio: An Early History**

*The Willow Tree* was composed during an era of American radio in which the interests of “market forces” and art music were in close alignment. Large conglomerates, including NBC and CBS, became strong patrons of art music, and actively commissioned new operatic and symphonic works by Marc Blitzstein, Aaron Copland, Charles Cadman, and others. For consumers and producers alike, the energy surrounding the new medium of radio was palpable. Music literature of the day noted the possibility of composers developing radio-specific acoustic effects; others were more interested in radio commissions, with one excited writer going so far as to call CBS Radio a “twentieth-century Esterhaza.”

It has been a common tendency within musicology to respond to this early milieu of radio culture by labeling *The Willow Tree* as the first opera commissioned for radio. Cadman himself promoted this notion when he referred to his work as “the first radio opera ever written,” and in his seminal study of the composer, H.D. Perison wrote that

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2 Cadman described it as such in 1933, upon his election to the American Academy of Arts and Letters. He evidently thought enough of the work that he donated an
The Willow Tree was, “the first opera composed expressly for radio broadcast, and as such it must be regarded as a landmark in the history of American music and broadcasting.” Such statements may reflect the desire to innovate in the early history of radio, but they tend to obscure both the early history of opera on radio and the musical content of Cadman’s opera.

The Willow Tree was one of many operas broadcast by NBC Radio in the 1920s and 1930s, and many listeners may not have attached particular importance to the label of the opera as the “first.” A 1948 NBC internal report of “Outstanding Programs” detailed the many successes that the network had achieved in broadcasting concert music in the 1930s, including an ambitious program of symphony concerts, recitals, choral concerts, and operas. The first radio broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera, a production of Humperdinck’s Hansel and Gretel, took place on December 25, 1931, after which intermediate version of the orchestral score to the Academy, in accordance with a requirement that its members donate a representative score or artwork upon their election. Charles Cadman, “The Willow Tree,” Manuscript Collection, American Academy of Arts and Letters, New York City.

3 Perison assesses the opera’s content more than any other source, but his histrionic description of The Willow Tree as a “landmark” is unhelpful. Harry D. Perison, “Charles Wakefield Cadman: His Life and Works” (Ph.D. diss., University of Rochester, 1978), 286. Elise Kuhl Kirk actually argues that The Willow Tree was the second opera “written specifically for radio transmission,” following Charles Skilton’s The Sun Bride (1930). Still, she mentions Cadman’s work merely for its novelty. See American Opera (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 234.

4 An NBC corporate report referred to this early mentality of innovation as the “quest for ‘first’,” and posited that after 1936, “broadcasters tended to concentrate on the improvement of accepted program forms.” Emphasis is my own. Undated report titled “Music,” Folder 1235, National Broadcasting Company History Files, Library of Congress, Motion Picture, Broadcasting and Recorded Sound Division. Hereafter referred to as the NBC History Files.

5 “Outstanding Programs,” Folder 1235, NBC History Files.
performances of opera became common fare on NBC. In 1932 alone, there were 25 broadcasts from opera houses including the Met, San Francisco, and Covent Garden.\textsuperscript{6} Dozens more operas were performed in shortened form from 1925-1930 and in 1932 by the NBC National Grand Opera Company.\textsuperscript{7}

NBC Radio’s active support of original compositions predated the creation of \textit{The Willow Tree}, further casting doubt on the opera’s position of novelty. A 1931 contest for orchestral works written for the radio awarded five cash prizes to composers Philip James, Max Wald, Carl Eppert, Florence Galajikian and Nicolai Berezowsky.\textsuperscript{8} Charles Skilton’s opera \textit{The Sun Bride}, while not specifically commissioned for radio, received its premiere performance on NBC in 1930. A handful of operas were also commissioned by NBC, including \textit{The Willow Tree} and Gian Carlo Menotti’s \textit{The Old Maid and the Thief} (1939).\textsuperscript{9}

Charles Cadman enjoyed a long professional relationship with NBC, which further suggests that the unique historical import ascribed to \textit{The Willow Tree} may perhaps be exaggerated. Cadman’s relationship with the network probably began with

\textsuperscript{6} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{8} “Outstanding Programs,” Folder 1235, NBC History Files.

\textsuperscript{9} This brief flurry of commissions seems to have largely subsided following the organization of NBC Radio’s in-house orchestra in 1937, under the direction of Arturo Toscanini.
the broadcast of several of his well-known songs, including “At Dawning.” The success of his opera Shanewis (The Robin Woman), which was first premiered at the Met on March 21, 1918, led to two broadcasts of the work on NBC in abbreviated form on May 9, 1928 and January 7, 1929. A Witch of Salem, another opera by the composer that was first premiered by the Chicago Civic Opera in 1926, was subsequently broadcast by the network on October 30, 1929.

If anything, Charles Cadman’s long and productive collaboration with NBC suggests that The Willow Tree should be viewed as the culmination of the composer’s creative relationship with the network rather than its beginning. Thus, it does not seem particularly important to include The Willow Tree as the “first” radio opera within historical narratives of early radio. Cadman’s opera was one of many that were performed on the radio during this era, and it would be far more useful to examine the content of The Willow Tree itself rather than to engage in uncertain histrionic statements.


According to McPherson, the work was performed under the guidance of Italian conductor Cesare Sodero, director of the NBC National Grand Opera Company. The 1928 performance was shortened to fit a one-hour time slot, and the second performance was expanded to an hour and a half. “Before the Met: The Pioneer Days. Part III: Cesare Sodero, the Music Man,” The Opera Quarterly 16 (2000): 413; “Before the Met,” 210-211.

“Ten strong fingers and an iron fist!”: The Willow Tree and Street Music

Although this chapter has questioned the conventional place of The Willow Tree within historical narratives, the developing historiography of street music offers a new potential means of productively engaging with the opera’s music and its characters. The opera’s two unstable Italian immigrants, a street musician named Pietro and his daughter Donella, are at first associated with pleasant Italian folk melodies that belie the violent, self-destructive nature of their actions at the work’s conclusion. While Pietro is not described as an organ grinder, his representation carried on the commonly held stereotype that held that Italian street musicians were a threat to American social cohesion.

The Willow Tree tells the story of Donella, an Italian teenager who works at a factory near an American port. Along with her father Pietro, identified as a street-piano player, she decides to spy upon her former lover, Gordon Stanton, before the pair depart on a boat back to Italy. Gordon, the son of the factory owner employing Donella, has tired of his romantic fling with the young Italian girl and plans to meet his new love interest, the wealthy American girl Allison, underneath a secluded willow tree. As the opera begins, Pietro and Donella arrive upon the scene, with an angry and vengeful Pietro determined to defend Donella’s honor at all costs.

Designed to fit within a thirty-minute radio time slot, The Willow Tree was broadcast in a “special presentation” in New York City at 10:30 p.m. on October 3, 1932, at the studios of WEAF, then the flagship station of NBC Radio’s Red Network.14

13 Perison states that the opera was broadcast at 9:30 in New York, but the NBC Master books indicate it was scheduled for 10:30-11:00. Perison seems to have misinterpreted a clipping from a Chicago newspaper, which rendered the time of the performance in central time. “Charles Wakefield Cadman: His Life and Works,” 285. For the clipping in question, see Charles Gilchrest, “Real Grand Opera Written for Radio Presentation,”
The one-act opera was conducted by Cesare Sodero and was carried by network affiliates throughout the east coast and midwest, assuring the work of a potential audience of millions.\textsuperscript{15} This large, diverse audience likely necessitated the use of accessible musical and textual themes, perhaps explaining the opera’s generalized association of street music with pleasant Italian folk tunes.

The plot of \textit{The Willow Tree} was developed, at least in part, as an imagined response to Desdemona’s “Willow Song” from Act IV of Giuseppe Verdi’s \textit{Otello}. In Verdi’s opera, the folk-like song of the willow is presented as a “song within a song”\textsuperscript{16} in which Desdemona describes the despair of another woman abandoned by a man as a parallel to her own predicament. In Cadman’s work, Donella’s primary aria quotes Desdemona’s melody in a slightly modified form (see Examples 9 and 10). The melody is shifted from 2/4 to cut time, necessitating the need for slight rhythmic augmentation of notes of longer duration. However, the melodic content of the vocal line is largely

\begin{flushright}
Undated Clipping, Scrapbook H, Box 19.2, Charles Wakefield Cadman Collection. The opening announcement is preserved in the NBC Red Network Master Books. It is possible that the remarks of Cadman and librettist Nelle Eberhart, delivered from an affiliate station in Chicago, were delivered off the cuff. NBC Red Network Master Books, Microfilm Reel 72, September 30, 1932 to October 15, 1932, NBC History Files.
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\textsuperscript{14} According to McPherson, \textit{The Willow Tree} was not a part of the regular schedule of the NBC National Grand Opera Company. Unlike the shortened operas presented by the company, Cadman’s opera was designed as a stand-alone work. McPherson, “Before the Met, Part III,” 415.

\textsuperscript{15} The NBC Red Network 1932 log book is no longer extant, preventing a detailed accounting of which affiliate stations carried the broadcast. Perison notes that the broadcast was heard in the East and Midwest, but not on the West Coast. Perison, “Charles Wakefield Cadman: His Life and Works,” 285.

\textsuperscript{16} Brooks Toliver, “Grieving in the Mirrors of Verdi’s Willow Song: Desdemona, Barbara and a ‘Feeble, Strange Voice’,” \textit{Cambridge Opera Journal} 10, no. 3 (November 1998): 289. Toliver describes it as a “song within a song within an opera.”
preserved, including the ascending arpeggiation of triplet eighth notes that abruptly pierces the first downbeat of the opening phrase. Donella’s aria describes her own predicament, thus negating the “song about a song” quality of the original scene from *Otello* while preserving its affective emphasis on grief over lost love. Unlike the tragic end of Verdi’s opera, which culminates in Desdemona’s murder due to false rumors of her infidelity, the gender roles in *The Willow Tree* are reversed. It is Gordon whose faithfulness has been called into question and who ultimately meets his death through strangulation.

Example 9. Desdemona's Aria From Act IV, Scene 1 of Giuseppe Verdi’s *Otello*


Example 10. Donella's Aria from Charles Cadman’s *The Willow Tree*


Note: Excerpts are drawn from the piano-vocal score preserved in the Cadman Collection.
Gordon’s murder at the hands of Pietro, textually foreshadowed throughout the work, is emblematic of the conflicting portrayal of Pietro as Italian other. At once both paternal figure and social pariah, his depiction as an emotionally unstable street musician draws together several social taboos explored by the work, including the forbidden nature of inter-class romance and the simmering tensions between immigrants and native-born Americans. Similar to the aria of his daughter, Pietro’s aria quotes a well-known tune connected to Italian folk culture, the popular Neapolitan song “O Sole Mio.” As Pietro describes the beauties of Italy to comfort his distressed daughter, the tune is heard within the accompaniment and marks the character as an Italian street musician. Composed in 1898 by Eduardo Di Capua, the tune had circulated in the United States through sheet music and popular recordings by artists that included Enrico Caruso and Emilio De Gorgoza.\(^{17}\)

In Pietro’s brief aria, as shown in Example 11, the accompaniment breaks free from the previous static eighth note figuration in measure 98, arching upward until the melody of “O Sole Mio” emerges in the upper register at the anacrusis to measure 99.\(^ {18}\) In contrast to the popular tune, which leaps upward before descending in step-wise motion, the contour of Pietro’s lyrical counter-melody proceeds in the opposite trajectory, leaping downward from C to F in measure 99 before ascending by step.

On many levels, the idealized vision of street music continues to assert itself within this scene. Pietro’s music and text are informed by a longstanding trope that


\(^{18}\) Music examples within this section are transcribed from the piano-vocal manuscript of *The Willow Tree* held by the Charles Wakefield Cadman collection.
Example 11. Pietro's Aria From *The Willow Tree*

[He takes Donella in his arms]

Pietro

old - er bright - er land Where al - mond and or - ange flow - er's per - fume the air.

Pno.

Expresively \( \frac{\text{\textbf{\textit{= 80}}}}{\text{\textbf{\textit{= 80}}}} \)

Pietro

You, too, shall bloom a - gain like a rose in spring - time and wake once

Pno.

With great expression

Pietro

more to love. Oh, grieve no long - - er Do - nel - la for

Pno.
viewed the return of street musicians at the end of winter as signifying the imminent arrival of spring.

The aria’s overtly sentimental imagery, emphasizing the natural abundance of Italy in springtime, is also associated intertextually with the central metaphor of the refrain of “O Sole Mio,” in which the sun is compared to a lover’s face: “A brighter sunshine / with brighter rays / My ray of sun / from your dear face!”

The tuneful, strophic characteristics of “O Sole Mio” had strong commercial appeal, and its simple diatonic harmonies were precisely the kind of populist fare that could be played on barrel organs and player pianos with ease.

In contrast to the folk-like charm of his aria, Pietro is decidedly unsentimental in most other parts of the opera, coming across as brusque and crude in his threats of violence. In the opening scene of the opera, as Donella and Pietro arrive near the willow tree, they converse with each other in a series of arioso passages that become increasingly

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Example 11. Continued

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animated. As Donella expressively reflects on the loss of her love, Pietro turns quickly to thoughts of vengeance. His words, tinged with exoticized visions of southern Italy, make clear the necessity of a blood sacrifice: “True daughter of the South are you, to give your heart’s warm life, and never count the cost! But the blood of the South runs hot! If tonight he proves untrue, he shall die!”

Shortly thereafter, Pietro’s threats of violence grow more specific, as he notes of his surroundings, “here is water enough [sic] to hide a dead man.” Characteristic of the overall style of *Willow Tree*, the accompaniment in measures 81-85 is sparse, supporting a straightforward vocal line that emphasizes the intelligibility of text (see Example 12). The phrase “ten strong fingers and an iron fist!” is paired with chromatic voice-leading to accentuate the passage’s implicit sense of violence. Altogether, the passage is in line with one critic’s assessment of the work: “Mr. Cadman has contrived simple, unobjectionable melodies, with few odd harmonies or rhythms to disturb the exposition of events.”

Pietro’s unstable portrayal, wildly vacillating between the paternal and the homicidal, reflected ongoing stereotypes of street musicians that portrayed them either as objects of pure sentiment or as dangerous threats to social harmony. That this portrayal was broadcast on the radio meant that the dangerous allure of street music still beckoned to millions of Americans. Far beyond the radio studio in New York City from which *The Willow Tree* originated, listeners probably did not attach any special significance to the opera’s questionable status as the first radio opera. However, some of them may very well have identified with the prejudicial notion that associated Italian immigrants with the

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supposed violence of street music. Whether benign or noxious in intent, this powerful stereotype lasted well into the 1930s, outlasting many of the actual street musicians themselves. As Chapter 5 will further demonstrate, urban denizens in the 1930s still harbored powerful feelings about street music and the larger social problems of immigration and cultural difference that such music came to represent.
CHAPTER 5
STREET MUSIC AND SOCIAL CONFLICT IN THE 1930s

Hurdy-gurdies [sic] aren’t supposed to be music. Hurdy-gurdies are romance, spring, one’s childhood, moods, dancing in the streets.

Elizabeth Onativia, Undated Letter to Fiorello La Guardia

When Fiorello La Guardia took office as Mayor of New York in 1934, he assumed stewardship of a city and a people in the throes of cultural and technological change. The automobile, now commonplace in the urban landscape, had forced changes in the patterns of everyday life and altered pedestrians’ traditional relationship to the street. Despite the harsh business environment during the Depression, developing media including cinema and radio were rapidly expanding their influence and reaching potential customers in new and innovative ways. The opportunities technology provided were manifold, but along with these new benefits came one particularly objectionable byproduct: noise.

In 1937, when Mayor La Guardia decided to permanently discontinue the licensing of street musicians, a controversy erupted. La Guardia’s ban, along with the reactions it provoked, can serve as a case study in elucidating the essential role that ideology plays in differentiating music from noise. The Mayor’s public rationale was couched in democratic ideals emphasizing his commitment to civic duty. Although he recognized the hand organ as music, he suggested that other free alternatives such as radio and public concerts could supplant the music’s function and enhance both corporal and municipal safety. In contrast, the private stance offered by La Guardia in his memoirs situated the barrel organ as noise. In keeping with prevailing stereotypes that
disparaged the Italian lower class, he viewed the silencing of the hurtful stereotype of the organ grinders as both personal and social progress.

Responses to the ban, which mostly defended street music in nostalgic and sentimental terms, made similar subjective judgments in setting the hand organ apart from urban noises and problems deemed truly objectionable. Newspaper editorials, along with an active letter-writing campaign, cultivated a grassroots commitment to civic duty, the goal of which was to hold the Mayor accountable for his actions. Musical works including Marc Blitzstein’s I’ve Got the Tune and the jazz hit Organ Grinder’s Swing also participated in and responded to the 1937 legal restrictions, although the desired impetus for this music was not necessarily one of democratic import.

In Marc Blitzstein’s song play I’ve Got the Tune, a composer’s whirlwind search for a socially relevant text to accompany his tune leads him to evoke the style of the banned barrel organ in a conventional four-measure waltz. The unsympathetic manner in which the passage is treated, due both to its brevity and its dismissal as a socially irrelevant genre, suggest that the silencing of organ grinders and their cohorts ordered by La Guardia was at odds with Marc Blitzstein’s expressed commitment to socialist activism and its resulting embrace of the noise of the street. In an entirely different medium, the animated Popeye short Organ Grinder’s Swing presents a humorous scenario in which two neighbors fight over the presence of an organ grinder and his monkey as a newly emerging “noise,” jazz, provides the musical narrative for the work. Although the cartoon is rife with humorous visual gags, its lack of overt ethnic stereotypes—features readily apparent in two other jazz-infused shorts from the 1930s with similar subject matter—draws further attention to the central question raised by its
characters: was organ grinding a pleasurable source of music, a noisy distraction, or both? The variety of cultural responses that this question received in 1937, and indeed throughout the 1930s and beyond, revealed underlying agendas as disparate as civic pride, socialist angst, and humorous absurdity. None of these responses, however, brought consensus or clarification to an issue motivated primarily by personal preference and desire.

“Hey Fiorello, you’re a dago too”: Fiorello La Guardia and the Street Music Ban

The La Guardia administration’s restrictions on street music began in 1934, when it came to the attention of the Mayor that the city maintained contracts with itinerant musicians to play on municipal ferries. Mayor La Guardia viewed this practice as “plainly an instance of licensing to beg on city property” and moved quickly to terminate the remaining contracts. Perhaps emboldened by this first success, an action that did not receive any press coverage whatsoever, it was announced in spring of 1935 that the city would cease the licensing of all street musicians effective January 1, 1936. This new measure seems to have almost immediately attracted the attention of the newspapers. Articles, editorials, and letters were soon railing against the decision, presenting La Guardia with a public relations fiasco that would not quickly diminish.

1 Fiorello La Guardia, Letter to E.A. Graham, March 27, 1935, Fiorello H. La Guardia Collection, La Guardia Community College, New York City, Box 3702, Folder 1. Hereafter this collection is referred to as the La Guardia Collection.

2 Ibid.

An article in the *New York Times* was one of the first to critique the new regulation, immediately framing its argument with the nostalgic observation that, “Not so long ago the coming of Spring in New York meant the gay music of hand organs in many of its streets.” The arguments advanced by opponents of the ban reflected common idealized tropes: street musicians heralded the coming of springtime, their music uniquely appealed to and pleased children, and they were often the only music that could be heard by the poorer elements of society.

For his own part, the Mayor was quick to offer his own official response to anyone that corresponded with his office. Intended to rebut the “purely sentimental reasons” put forth by his opponents, La Guardia’s stock letter hinged on two arguments: that hand organs were no longer useful or necessary and that to license them would be to condone begging:

My feeling in the matter is that the institution of organ grinding has long outlived its purpose. There was a time when it was really the only means of bringing melodious tunes to the ears of many people.

However, about a generation ago the phonograph came into general use. Still later the radio came into general use and provided music of all kinds.

Meanwhile, public concerts became quite general and now are an established institution. We have free public concerts in parks, libraries and other public places. As far as music is concerned the organ grinder no longer fills a needed want.

In addition, traffic conditions are entirely different from what they were when the hand organ was at the height of its popularity. In fact in many districts they almost constitute a menace to the lives of children who are tempted to gather about them and follow them through the streets despite the presence of automobiles and trucks.

There are also other reasons for the elimination of hand organs. Considerable abuses have been practiced. There have been instances of exploiters who rented out the instruments at exorbitant fees. To curb such practices licenses were

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4 Ibid.
necessary. What I object to is that a City like New York should license or give permission to any individual for public begging. Every fee the city takes is just a percentage of the public begging. It is this feature that I object to and want to eliminate.  

La Guardia’s letter, meant to communicate the practicality of his policy decision, acknowledges organ grinding as music while suggesting other musical options more in line with his particular conception of civic harmony and order.

Years later, La Guardia wrote in his memoirs of a more personal grudge against hand organs. His remarks, less concerned with music than with the remedying of hurtful ethnic stereotype, suggest that the Mayor’s personal distaste for street musicians influenced his decision in addition to political considerations. Recounting a childhood encounter with an organ grinder, an experience he described as his “first glimpse of racial feeling born of ignorance,” La Guardia wrote:

I must have been about ten when a street organ-grinder with a monkey blew into town. He, and particularly the monkey, attracted a great deal of attention. I can still hear the cries of the kids: “A dago with a monkey! Hey, Fiorello, you’re a dago too. Where’s your monkey Fiorello?”

The Mayor’s admitted dislike of the musicians injected an element of bias into what was otherwise presented as an objective decision making process. To La Guardia, a native-born Jewish-Italian American who enjoyed the benefits of upward mobility, it was not only the act of organ grinding that was deemed objectionable. The mere presence of the

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5 Fiorello La Guardia, Letter to E.A. Graham.


7 La Guardia’s pronouncement was not entirely without reference to public policy. He notes, for example, the increased benefits to traffic flow as a result of the ban’s enactment. Ibid.
“dago with a monkey,” even if temporary, fostered the perception of an innate connection between the lower class profession and Italian identity. It created a kind of social cacophony not limited to the aural sphere: the unfiltered noise of stereotype and prejudice. Thus, in restricting the hand organ, La Guardia revealed his motivations to be at once both personal and political, and above all, subjective.

The Mayor received a large amount of correspondence in response to the street music ban, in part a response to *New York Tribune* columnist Don Marquis’ appeal that 500,000 residents send in letters in support of organ grinders. This number seems hardly realistic; it would have required nearly 7% of the total population of New York to participate in order to accomplish such a feat. However, several dozen letters have been preserved in the Fiorello La Guardia archival collection. The breadth of professions represented in these letters, not dominated by any particular ideological stance or agenda, suggests this correspondence may be merely representative of a larger corpus of written protests no longer extant. Authors, ministers, businessmen, school children, artists, and lawyers all wrote in with a variety of perspectives on the issue. While some continued to view the issue as a noise problem, most writers described hand organs as pleasant music

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10 It is unlikely that in a city as large as New York, every letter received by the Mayoral administration would have been neatly preserved and archived for posterity. It seems reasonable to assume, therefore, that the extant letters are merely a representative sample of a larger body of correspondence.
that was being wrongly restricted. A letter signed by “a very disgusted regular voter”
described the experience of listening to street music in the “clang” of the city:

I live on the noisiest corner in N.Y. City and have lived here for several years, and
have had to move from one apt. to another because of the terrific noises on this
corner—the surface-cars clanging for four and five blocks, continuously,
ceaselessly up and down, night and day, the early morning roar of trucks and
horns, the greyhound buses that toot their horns for miles as early as four A.M.,
the fire and ambulance and Police sirens, in fact the noise is continuous and
terrific—and then for you to stop what every true New Yorker loves—the hurdy
gurdy’s [sic], which always “move on” when annoying, and are the one musical
note in the whole clang of N.Y. City—is the most grotesque thing imaginable,
childish, silly, and inane.11

While the author neatly distinguishes between noise and music in this passage, other
writers did not make as clear a distinction. In describing the hand organ as “merry
racket,” novelist Fannie Hurst managed to classify the instrument as both noise and
music:

Women in tenement kitchens can stir up tastier stews to the tune of ‘O Sole Mio’
from the court beneath; pedestrians with faces like vinegar pickles can be made to
smile, and lady-writers in their studys [sic] like the merry racket as the melodies
spill in the street under their windows.12

Perhaps the most curious of all the extant correspondence received by the Mayor
was written by Pierrepont Twitchell, secretary of the League for Less Noise, a local noise
abatement organization. Rather than congratulate La Guardia for his restriction of the
organ grinders, he maintained quite the opposite opinion:

I note from time to time in the public press mention of the question of the removal
of hand organ men from the streets of New York by the process of forbidding

11 Letter to Fiorello La Guardia, January 3, 1936, La Guardia Collection, Box 3702,
Folder 2a.

12 Fannie Hurst, Letter to Fiorello La Guardia, January 23, 1936, La Guardia Collection,
Box 3702, Folder 2a.
them licenses. I sincerely hope that it will not be necessary to do this, for I feel that they give a home-like touch which is desirable.\(^\text{13}\)

Twitchell’s language is reminiscent of contemporary noise abatement reformers, who classified noises according to their necessary or “unnecessary” function. Perhaps aware of the contradiction and irony contained within his letter, he attempted to clarify the discrepancy between his personal and his official opinions:

> Although I am Secretary of the League for Less Noise and Vice Chairman of one of the sub-committees of your Honor’s Noise Abatement Committee, the above comment is personal and unofficial, but none the less [sic] sincerely meant.\(^\text{14}\)

Heated correspondence was not the only means with which protests were lodged with the Mayor. The medium of radio, which La Guardia had specifically cited as part of his rationale in enacting the ban, allowed for the public to hear protests directly from the organ grinders themselves about their precarious situation. Broadcast on NBC on January 13, 1936, as part of May Breen and Peter de Rose’s show, *Calling All Sweethearts*, three organ grinders—Caesar Donati, Caesar Borsotti, and Anthony Negri—made their case to the public at large.\(^\text{15}\) According to the show’s script, the three men provided short, prepared answers to their hosts, indicating they possessed a limited command of English. Songs closely associated with the hand organ were played, including “O Sole mio” and Blake’s “Sidewalks of New York,” and Breen and De Rose read telegrams of support from entertainers Rudy Vallee and Paul Whiteman announcing

\(^{13}\) Pierrepont Twitchell, Letter to Fiorello La Guardia, January 17, 1936, La Guardia Collection, Box 3702, Folder 2a.

\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) *Calling All Sweethearts*, January 13, 1936, NBC Red Network master Books, Box 6-A, NBC Collection, Library of Congress, Performing Arts Division.
their disappointment with the Mayor’s decision. The unexpected support of these professional musicians further bolstered the contention that organ grinding was music rather than noise.

Despite this sustained tenor of support for street music, not all of the discourse surrounding the controversy critiqued Mayor La Guardia’s actions. Some correspondents were only too happy to finally see the noisy street musicians silenced once and for all. But the Mayor’s difficulty in forging political consensus around this issue suggests a more basic problem involved in legislating noise. As Emily Thompson has argued, “Laws newly passed… identified relatively powerless targets, noisemakers, who impeded, in ways not just acoustical, the middle-class vision of a well-ordered city.” The process of differentiating between those who created noise and those who created music was a subjective one, subject to the whims of ideology and individual taste.

**Sounds of Protest: Marc Blitzstein’s I’ve Got the Tune**

Fannie Hurst’s praise of the “merry racket” of street music suggests that there was a “third way” of interpreting the dialectical tension between noise and music. At least some listeners did not see the need to disassociate two concepts; in fact, they perceived the intersection of noise and music as a site of pleasure. Like Hurst, composer Marc Blitzstein viewed noisiness an important aspect of the experience of music. Throughout the 1930s, Blitzstein experimented with the use of popular idioms to fulfill his vision of a socially relevant music with the power to agitate and foment change. 17 1937 was a

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16 Thompson, *The Soundscape of Modernity*, 123.

17 Carol Oja has examined Marc Blitzstein’s use of “Mass song” style during this time period as an extension of his activities within the Composers’ Collective of New York. See Carol Oja, “Marc Blitzstein’s The Cradle Will Rock and Mass-Song Style of the
particularly productive year for the composer. In addition to the premiere of his provocative musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, a work that has been frequently discussed within the literature,\(^{18}\) Blitzstein’s song play for radio was also performed on the CBS network.\(^{19}\)

*I’ve Got the Tune* was especially commissioned for radio and premiered on CBS on October 24, 1937, the year following the expiration of street music licenses. The style of the work is influenced by the composer’s characteristic emphasis on accessible musical idioms and a strongly socialist political message that relied upon topical events to bolster its credibility.\(^{20}\) The work tells the story of Mr. Musiker, a composer with a tune who is travelling around the world to find someone to provide meaningful words to accompany his melody. Displeased with several variants of the tune, including a modernist evocation of *Sprechstimme* and an organum-like duet, Mr. Musiker begins Scene 5 walking on a noisy street with his assistant, Beetzie. Loud street sounds permeate the scene as the two characters begin their dialogue.

Beetzie: My land, how can you stand the noise, Mr. Musiker?

Mr. Musiker: I don’t mind the noise, I like the noise.

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Beetzie: And you a musician, Mr. Musiker!21

Curiously, Mr. Musiker seems most content amidst the din of the street. At the end of the musical passage, the street sounds suddenly drop out, and Mr. Musiker and Beetzie start to recall some of the other uses of the tune. After an oriental lullaby is played, Beetzie introduces the tune of the “Italian organ-grinder,” a variation of Mr. Musiker’s tune in the form of a four measure waltz (see Example 13).

Mr. Musiker is unhappy with the organ grinder’s tune, and it is also set aside; he eventually settles on a group of school children singing pro-labor songs. But the composer does not condescend to provide a rationale for the hand organ’s unsuitability as a musical and social vehicle. The unsatisfactory outcome of other variations, such as the evocation of Tin Pan Alley, is fully explained.22 But why is the organ grinder’s tune deemed ineffective?


21 Marc Blitzstein, I’ve Got the Tune (New York: Chappell, 1948), 22.

22 Beetzie notes that “when we got to Tin Pan Alley, they’d already swiped your tune!” Blitzstein, I’ve Got the Tune, 41.
The solution to this question lies in Blitzstein’s conception of noise within *I’ve got the Tune*. Mr. Musiker’s essential comfort in the noisy milieu of the street belies a socio-political belief in the power of noise to disrupt the prevailing social order, a disruption viewed by the composer as sorely needed. Before the waltz of the organ grinder is introduced, the street sounds that opened Scene 5 are completely silenced, leading the hand organ to be introduced in a soundscape shorn of noise. Thus, for Mr. Musiker, who prefers the disruptive power of noise, street music is not noisy enough. If, as Akihiro Taniguchi asserts, Blitzstein employed music “as a weapon,” by 1937 the hand organ had been disarmed.

**“It’s not so good, but nobody mind”: Animating the Organ Man**

While Blitzstein may no longer have viewed the hand organ as a vehicle for social or sonic disruption, its inclusion was nevertheless useful. For audiences of the 1930s, the inclusion of the street musician immediately brought to mind a figure etched into their shared cultural memory. A series of animated shorts from Fleischer Studios and Warner Brothers demonstrate the barrel organ’s continuing appeal to the public’s imagination. Like many cartoons of this era, jazz often permeates the aesthetic design of these works. Although jazz was not known to have been played by historical organ grinders, such an aural commingling became possible within the fanciful realm of the cartoon.

This syncretism extended to the visual realm of the cartoon as well. The capuchin monkey, although no longer a fixture of the street, was now restored to its place alongside the organ grinder. Long banished as a result of strict health regulations, its fictive depiction was a boon to animators who were expected to provide a near constant

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supply of humorous visual gags. The gags by monkeys, which included scat singing, dancing, and the playing of musical instruments, are rife with allusions to jazz and minstrelsy and were often tinged with stereotypes more typically associated with African Americans.

The racially charged history of jazz has been frequently explored within musicological studies. As the entry on jazz in the *New Grove Dictionary* notes, “problems in accounting for the identity, function and racial character of jazz are bound up in one another. They have been present from the very beginning.” In perhaps the only full-length musicological study of cartoon music, Daniel Goldmark examines in detail early cartoons which used jazz as their conceptual basis, arguing that the music in these shorts “functions simultaneously as the inspiration for the narrative and as the explicit source of its rhythm.” Goldmark further documents how the appearance of African American musicians such as Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong in cartoons was frequently paired with nativist or jungle imagery that associated jazz with “the savage hinterland.” The three cartoons examined here—Warner Brothers’ *The Organ Grinder*, and two Fleischer Studio shorts, *My Friend the Monkey*, and *Organ Grinder’s Swing*—are situated in urban locales, but the presence of the organ grinder’s monkey afforded

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26 This jungle imagery is portrayed as an extension of Harlem jazz clubs, which typically featured “tropical and jungle motifs.” Goldmark, *Tunes for ‘toons*, 82, 92.
animators a similar opportunity, if they desired, to align primitivistic imagery and jazz with black identity.

In *The Organ Grinder*, a 1933 short that was part of Warner Brothers’ *Merry Melodies* series, an overweight, jovial Italian organ grinder cranks his instrument as he navigates an urban streetscape with his monkey. As was the custom with Warner Brothers shorts in the early 30s, the cartoon featured a song from the Warner song catalog.27 “The organ grinder,” with music by Sam Stept and lyrics by Herb Magidson, was published in 1932 by Warner subsidiary Whitmark.28

After the organ grinder has sung the verse and chorus of the song, a fox trot in 4/4 time with standard four measure phrases (see Example 14), the monkey collects money from pedestrians and tenement dwellers, all the while engaging in a variety of visual gags such as “unzipping” the peal of a banana and wheeling himself across a clothesline by jumping into a pair of hanging underwear. The scene is populated with white characters who happily hum, scat, and sing along to the title song, a light-hearted, tuneful melody written in a swing idiom.

The musical proclivities of the people inhabiting the scene are largely in line with Goldmark’s observation that white animated characters tended to eschew “hot jazz” in favor of the “safer ground of swing-infused pop songs.”29 Tony the monkey, on the other

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27 The *Merry Melodies* animators were in fact contractually obligated to use a Warner song as the title song in each of their shorts. Ibid., 17.


29 One female tenement dweller, however, does lightly scat along to the tune of the organ grinder at one point. Goldmark, *Tunes for ‘toons*, 103.
Example 14. Partial Transcription of “The Organ Grinder” from the Animated Short The Organ Grinder


Note: The transcription is my own. The eighth note groupings are performed in a swung rhythmic style. The boxed notes were played in the accompaniment, but omitted by the singer.

hand, is depicted as a talented performer. Similar to the role fulfilled by black musicians in other cartoons, he dares to play a more improvisatory style in the midst of his intrigued white audience. When a group of children arrive on the scene to watch the duo of street performers, the organ man instructs Tony to “get hot.” The organ begins to grind out the title song at a heightened rhythmic pace, its timbre becoming even more exaggerated in order to mimic the wheezy, out-of-tune sound of an actual barrel organ.

The monkey begins to prance around on his toes, flapping his hands up and down in a style that brings to mind the dance routines of blackface minstrelsy (see Figure 6). After parodying several celebrities— including homages to comedy duo Laurel and Hardy and to Harpo Marx, complete with a wig and a harp, Tony proceeds to give a fantastical performance played simultaneously on several instruments. He first plays a

30 Regarding the comparison of cartoons to minstrelsy, Goldmark notes, “Minstrelsy never really died- it simply changed media.” Goldmark, Tunes for ‘toons, 84.
a. Tony Dancing For the Street Children

b. Tony Performing “42nd Street”

Figure 6. Tony the Monkey in *The Organ Grinder* (1933)

more upbeat rendition of the title song on two pianos, an ascerbic interpolation that injects improvisatory elements of ragtime style into the staid pop tune. This segues into a noisy performance of the tune “42nd Street,” which the monkey plays “solo” on a clarinet, piano, accordion, and snare drum (see Figure 6). The film musical 42nd Street had been released by Warner Brothers that same year, and the tune’s inclusion represents another example of cross-promotion within the short.

As Tony takes the helm of an automobile, “42nd Street” recedes into the background as non-diagetic music, and the vehicle crashes into a nearby music store and sends its instruments flying. The message the cartoon seems to promote is that the monkey’s alluring musicality, which reflects in some ways the stereotyped treatment of black musicians, is ultimately dangerous and self-destructive. Rather than literally destroy the music, it is far safer, albeit less musically interesting, to leave it in the disciplined hands of white performers.

Although produced by a different team of animators at New York-based Fleischer Studios, the depiction of a monkey in the 1939 Betty Boop short My Friend the Monkey shows strong affinities with the portrayal of the simian’s musical abilities in The Organ

31 The music in this scene is scored for a larger ensemble that further accentuates the frantic diagesis of the on-screen action.


33 Goldmark, Tunes for ‘toons, 103-104.
Grinder. In this short, Betty Boop is entertained by an organ grinder and monkey who show up outside of her apartment playing a simple waltz that is heard on the soundtrack with intentionally flat notes that mimic the coarse strains of the barrel organ. When Betty asks the monkey to dance, the grinder strikes up a jazz tune and the monkey immediately begins scat singing (see Figure 7). Having solidified his musical prowess with Betty, who scats back in a brief moment of call and response, the monkey is invited into the apartment to play with Betty’s pet dog. True to form, humorous chaos ensues between monkey and dog, as the dangerous music of jazz leads directly to physical destruction. The monkey’s charismatic presence in these shorts signifies the unsavory noise of unbridled musicality, a depiction which perhaps reveals as much about conceptions of jazz as it does about those of street music.

But despite its outsized presence, the monkey did not completely overshadow its human interlocutor, the organ grinder. For even if the monkey brought noise and destruction into the neighborhood, it was ultimately the organ man who was responsible for encouraging his subversive simian. The depiction of organ grinders was quite similar in both My Friend the Monkey and The Organ Grinder (see Figure 8). Stereotypically portrayed as a heavy-set, cheerful Italian endowed with no particularly attractive musical or physical attributes, he personified the lazy beggarliness to which

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Figure 7. A Monkey Singing Scat in *My Friend the Monkey* (1939)


Figure 8. The Organ Grinder in *The Organ Man* (left) and *My Friend The Monkey* (right)
Mayor La Guardia strenuously objected.

The Fleischer short *Organ Grinder’s Swing* was created the year following the street music ban and offered a visual and musical narrative that was more nuanced in its ethnic politics. Unlike other Fleischer shorts, it did not feature cameo appearances by jazz musicians such as Cab Calloway or Louis Armstrong, this despite the apparent popularity of its title song, “Organ Grinder Swing.” Composed by Will Hudson in 1936, the tune was a swing interpolation of the song “I Love Coffee, I Love Tea.” The number received frequent performances in the 1930s; it was performed often by the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, and Ella Fitzgerald released a studio recording of the tune in 1936.

The topical nature of Fleischer Studio’s visual gags have been described by Norman Klein as “built on urban and industrial experience, a fantasy world of neighborhoods, sweatshops, pool halls, Coney Island rides, and most of all, Manhattan vaudeville.” *Organ Grinder’s Swing*, with its New York setting and chronological proximity to La Guardia’s legal action, is therefore an ideal vehicle in gauging contemporary attitudes toward the street music ban. In the cartoon, Popeye and his nemesis, Bluto come to blows over the presence of an organ grinder, played here by lazy

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curmudgeon Wimpy and his monkey, who have appeared in front of their apartment building.

As Popeye and Olive Oyl dance to the title song being played on the hand organ, Bluto brusquely implores the organ grinder to “cut out that racket and get outta here!” Popeye’s response—“Music is good for yous [sic], and I says he stays”—illustrates the characters’ basic disagreement over the difference between noise and music. This dialectical tension is perfect fodder for the “rolling traumas” encountered in the remainder of the cartoon, and is notable for its lack of strong ethnic stereotypes.

Although Wimpy is admittedly quintessentially lazy, there is nothing about his portrayal here that overtly marks him as Italian. Similarly, the monkey is just that: a monkey. It is not endowed with extraordinary musical abilities, nor is its physical profile aligned with African American stereotypes.

The end result of the cartoon is a symbolic reversal of the sanctions placed upon street music. Popeye atones for Bluto’s vigilantist destruction of the hand organ by pulverizing the brute and throwing his limp body into a piano, where in a visual gag Bluto becomes a human barrel organ “played” by Popeye. The karmic justice that empowered organ grinders in this cartoon fantasy was, however, not meant to be. Fiorello La Guardia never relented to critics of his 1937 policy, and his eight subsequent years in office ensured that the few organ grinders that remained continued to be silenced. The fictive transformation of the hand organ was complete.

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39 Organ Grinder’s Swing is available on Popeye, the Sailor, 1933-1938, DVD, Max Fleischer Cartoon Studio, Warner Home Video, 2007.

40 Term used by Klein, who writes that “Fundamentally, the Popeye story... requires one metamorphosis after another, like rolling traumas.” Ibid., 66.
Jazz and Street Music

In exploring what Daniel Goldmark has called the “rhetorical power”\(^{41}\) of cartoons, it becomes clear that the absurd, freewheeling aesthetic cultivated in early shorts tolerated unconventional cultural associations. It allowed, for example, jazz to be played by a barrel organ, or for a monkey to become a talented musician. This “narrative anarchy”\(^{42}\) within cartoons and their music encouraged an aural freedom that appeared to express quite the opposite of Fiorello La Guardia’s agenda, and that of a noise reform movement which desired to control sound itself.\(^{43}\) However, if we begin to accept the absurdity of cartoons at face value, a common zeitgeist begins to emerge. It is not so much that the notion of a “swinging” organ grinder is silly and inane, but rather that it is so easily appropriate to align the two musical styles. Both jazz and street music came to be associated with a vulnerable ethnic minority, and both had their stylistic legitimacy weakened as a result.

The citizens of New York in the 1930s subscribed to a diverse number of ideological stances that ranged from civic pride to socialist activism, or even artistic anarchy. But despite the changing cultural milieu, many audiences still relied upon tropes of street music initially formed in the nineteenth-century that emphasized the alterity of the lower class. Thus, although Mayor La Guardia’s licensing ban may have ended the physical presence of organ grinders in the streets, it did not end their fictive presence within mediated forms of representation. Audiences and composers of the

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\(^{41}\) Goldmark, “Merry Melodies”, 5.


\(^{43}\) Thompson, *The Sounds of Modernity*, 123.
1930s, like those before them, still turned to these art works as a way of responding to their ethnic and social problems. The organ grinder, so it seemed, was never truly silenced.
CONCLUSIONS

Street musicians in nineteenth and twentieth-century New York City were a marginalized minority that came to be appropriated within genres including songs, animated shorts, and operas. Little is known about the perspective of the musicians themselves, but their depiction in art and prose has enriched our understanding of their middle class audiences. Reformers, columnists, politicians, artists, and regular citizens alike framed their response to street musicians within a common historical milieu, one in which noise problematically saturated the urban environment and in which millions of immigrants were being absorbed by a reticent native population.

Responses to nineteenth-century street music within columns, letters, and political cartoons emphasized two underlying social agendas. Reformers such as Charles Loring Brace viewed organ grinders as a social problem to be solved through a program of education that assimilated immigrants into American culture. Advocates of a law-and-order approach sought a more direct means to decrease the noise levels of the music, an ideological stance that led to a successful, but controversial street music ordinance during the administration of Mayor Hugh Grant. Despite their dissimilar approaches, both factions strongly associated street music with Italian immigrants and exoticized them as poor, uneducated, Catholic Other.

Although musical depictions of street music possessed a similar proclivity to exoticize Italian identity, the process of mediation and appropriation at work within music was different than that of written prose or visual art. Beginning with a series of polka and waltz arrangements composed by pianist Mathias Philippi in the mid-nineteenth century, sheet music explored the personas and musical qualities of organ
grinders and street bands from the mediated perspective of the middle class. In Charles Neil Daniel’s “Niccolini” and Walter Donaldson’s “When Verdi Plays the Hurdy Gurdy,” the imagined linguistic alterity of Italian immigrants was signified through the use of misspellings and clipped, shortened syllables that altered the rhythmic pace of English.

The use of dance idioms, as demonstrated by the waltz accompaniment in Charles Kassel Harris’ “The Organ Grinder’s Serenade,” proved to be a particularly popular way of denoting a characteristic, mediated street music style. Through its use of evocative cover art and subject matter that touched on the imagined innocence of children, Harris’ song typified the myriad of textual and musical choices made by composers who represented street music in their works.

Even as street music declined in the twentieth century, it continued to resonate in the imagination of composers as well as the middle class. In Charles Ives’ From Hanover Square North, the loud, clashing quotations of the American gospel hymn “In The Sweet Bye and Bye” aurally signified the program’s commuters in concert with the organ grinder. The program for the work may have been inspired by literary representations of organ grinders, particularly a similar tableau within Nathaniel Hawthorne’s novel The House of Seven Gables. Although Ives’ use of an American melody eschewed overt Italianate musical qualities, the accentuation of Italian musical stereotype continued elsewhere. Charles Cadman’s opera The Willow Tree, for example, depicted an unstable street musician and his daughter in concert with the quotation of the Italian tunes “O Sole Mio” and the “Willow Song” from Verdi’s Otello.

The difficulty that members of the public faced in distinguishing between noise and music in the 1930s animated the controversy surrounding Mayor La Guardia’s
decision to end the licensing of organ grinders. Whereas the Mayor’s respondents frequently invoked the nostalgia of childhood experience in classifying organ grinding as music, La Guardia’s own bitter childhood memories of the street performers led him to conclude that they were a noisy distraction whose presence could only encourage hurtful ethnic stereotypes. The extant letters do not clarify the question of whether barrel organs were noise or music, indicating that such a judgment was inherently subjective and influenced by ideological preference.

Artists in the 1930s similarly responded to the divide between noise and music, while also refashioning the topical importance of organ grinders. Marc Blitzstein embraced the intersection of noise and music in his desire to foment social change, but he seems to have attached little relevance to the barrel organ in his song play I’ve Got the Tune. In the wake of the Mayor’s ban, the instrument was no longer noisy enough to satisfy the composer’s desire to create socially relevant music. The animated shorts of Warner Brothers and Fleischer Studios, on the other hand, revived the significance of organ grinders with the addition of a boisterous, jazz-infused soundtrack. Paired with an embellished visual depiction of organ grinders and their simian companions, the music in shorts such as My Friend the Monkey and The Organ Grinder aligned representations of street music with the “noise” of early jazz, along with its unsettling racial politics.

This thesis demonstrated how written accounts of street musicians filtered ethnic stereotype, and how subsequent artistic representations both reflected and changed the reception of street musicians by the middle class. In truth, however, the reception of street music was likely much more complex than conventional historiography currently allows. In the first place, evidence from the perspective of New York’s street musicians
was largely non-existent due the performers’ high rates of illiteracy and non-fluency in English. Had these accounts been created, they may have indeed moderated some of the excessive stereotypes in both the history and the historiography of street music.

So how did New York’s literate, native-born citizens shape their opinions of street music? First and foremost, they encountered organ grinders and their ilk on the streets, often on a daily and even hourly basis; they sometimes recorded their impressions of the performers in prose, and may have talked about the musicians with friends and acquaintances; they read newspapers that contained stories of organ grinders in the police blotter, street music ordinances, letters to the editor, and concert reviews; they heard songs about organ grinders and street bands performed by amateurs and in vaudeville performances; in later decades, they heard and watched depictions of organ grinders in radio, opera, and in animated shorts.

Understanding that representations of street music occurred in many media including prose, art, music, and the moving image can yield to a new interdisciplinary model of historiography that better accounts for the circulation of ideas in nineteenth and twentieth century New York. This model may reveal little about the musicians themselves, but it does provide further insight into a middle class holding a mirror up to its own problems. This diverse body of culture that New Yorkers drew upon in forming their opinion of organ grinders was by no means static, and was often informed by decades of personal and collective cultural memories that unleashed a broad spectrum of emotions that included dread, nostalgia, and indifference. That urban denizens could not often come to agreement on the basic meaning of street music is symptomatic of the larger social and aural problems they faced. Their understanding of street music may
have blurred the boundaries between real and fictive, between noise and music, but it further delineated the imagined gulf between native-born and immigrant, and middle class and lower class. Both real and fictive cultural constructions of organ grinders reveal a class of citizens who, despite their education and literacy, continued to create meaning through ethnic, class-based stereotype.
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