

*‘Sing, sing! Why shouldn’t we sing?’
Popular music in the age of the music hall*

Let’s all go to the music hall,
Where the show is gay and bright.
Let’s all go to the music hall.
Where the stars are twinkling twice a night.
Whether you sit in the gallery, the circle, or the pit,
Or whether you sit in a plush red stall.
When the busy day is done, if you want to have
some fun,
Let’s all go to the music hall.

A.V.W., ‘Let’s All Go to the Music Hall.’

POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN the Victorian and Edwardian eras is often seen to be synonymous with music hall. The enduring popularity of its songs, not to mention its re-invention in the later twentieth century, warrants close study, but there is a danger of oversimplifying a complex development and, more importantly, of overlooking other forms of popular music that were important at the time. To remedy this, the first section of this chapter provides a brief overview of the broader musical context within which music hall developed and raises the broader question of what constituted popular music. The second section outlines some of the key features of the development of music halls and singing saloons, arguing that the palatial halls, so visible in the West End of London and the major city centres, were the tip of an iceberg of venues and performers that provided an internal dynamic to the overall business, and extended its reach to a wider audience than ever

attended the great halls. This is explored further in the final section which focuses primarily on the changing composition of audiences, arguing that the shift towards a more middle-class audience is easily overstated, and the limits of the direct impact of music hall understated.

Popular music-making in Victorian and Edwardian England

Popular music-making in the early decades of the nineteenth century was both diverse and dynamic as entrepreneurs responded to changing socio-economic and demographic circumstances and the growth in demand for leisure. Music hall did not spring up, fully formed in the mid-nineteenth century but evolved out of a mix of travelling showmen, bringing entertainment to the people, and publicans (and others), bringing the people to the entertainment. Ongoing urbanization changed the economics and organisation of popular leisure provision, but the pace of change was uneven across the country. The itinerant entertainer, ballad sellers and the like, continued to be important figures, well into the 1860s and 1870s, for those who were excluded, financially or geographically, from the new forms of entertainment. The relationship with other forms of musical entertainment was complex. In some cases, it was symbiotic, in others more confrontational, especially from those who railed against the commercialization and perceived inauthenticity of music hall. For many conservative, middle-class critics, music hall was destructive of both authentic folk song and improving music.¹

The belief in music as a source of improvement and social unity underpinned, in part, the growth of choral societies and brass bands, particularly, but not exclusively, in the north of England.² The strength of support for the choral movement from 'the respectable lower classes' is clear, though audiences were predominantly middle class.³ Even more so, the brass band movement, seen as 'one of the most remarkable working-class cultural achievements,' was firmly rooted in smaller, often geographically isolated, working-class communities, particularly industrialised villages.⁴ Although commonly linked with chapel and temperance, there were numerous work-based bands, including the West Riding Lunatic Asylum and Arsenal F C, and many more dependent on public subscription.

Both choirs and brass bands saw themselves as vehicles of community-based improvement, which was reflected in their repertoire. The Huddersfield Choral Society, for example, was renowned for its renditions of Handel's *Messiah*. Purists might quibble at the exploitation of classical 'hits,' such as the anvil chorus from *Il Trovatore*, the grand march from *Aida* and the ubiquitous *William Tell* overture, but brass bands brought elements of classical music to a wider audience and into the realm of popular music. Indeed, by the early twentieth century, composer such as Elgar and Holst were composing specifically for brass bands.⁵ But this did not necessarily mean that the popular music of the music hall was totally shunned. The Halifax Glee and Madrigal Society's repertoire included 'My Old Dutch' and 'Mrs 'Enery Hawkins.'

Across the country brass bands played regularly in local parks and at seaside resorts.⁶ They were but one, albeit the most prominent, part of a range of local music-making activities that embraced concertina bands, bell-ringers and amateur orchestras.⁷ There was a more irreverent tradition of music making, variously known as 'Waffen Fuffen' or 'Jiggerum, Jiggerum' bands, which echoed earlier mummers' performances. Bizarrely attired, including in their ranks Zulu warriors, Red Indians [*sic*], Charlie Chaplin look-alikes and even Old Mother Riley, and with instrumentation that included watering-cans, pots, pans and kettles, bands from the West Riding of Yorkshire, when not busking, regularly appeared at charity events, such as the annual fête in aid of Huddersfield Infirmary.

There was also a continuing tradition of private music-making and singing. Cheap instruments, such as penny whistles and concertinas, became more readily available and even pianos were to be found in some working-class homes, as well as public houses. What was sung or played remains shrouded in mystery but is likely to have included a mixture of hymns, ('Lead Kindly Light,' or 'Abide With Me,') parlour songs, ('The Lost Chord' or 'Come Into the Parlour Maud,') operatic 'hits,' ('I Dreamt that I Dwelled in Marble Halls,' or 'Take A Pair of Sparkling Eyes,') and English and American-imported music hall/minstrelsy favourites, ('After the Ball,' 'Lily of Laguna,' 'Champagne Charlie,' or 'My Old Dutch').⁸

Popular music-making in Victorian England was diverse and the intermixing of genres defied neat definition.

Music Hall: chronological, geographical and organisational changes

The history of music hall in England has been chronicled thoroughly and thoughtfully elsewhere but it is important to highlight certain points directly relevant to this study.⁹ The London-centric approach of earlier histories, with Charles Morton and the Canterbury in pride of place, has been replaced by a more nuanced account that recognises the diverse, broad-based and evolutionary nature of development. With the ongoing concentration of the population and an increase in disposable income as working-class living standards edged upwards, music venues, variously named ‘singing saloons’ or ‘music halls,’ sprang up in a variety of towns and cities at roughly the same time in the mid-nineteenth century. The London Music Hall Proprietors’ Protection Association had a vested interest in maintaining a closed shop for the leading halls, but outside London the distinction between the two was largely meaningless and the terms were often used interchangeably. Similarly, the distinction between amateur entertainment (‘free and easies’) and professional (‘singing saloons’ or ‘music halls’) often breaks down on closer examination. Not surprisingly, provision was more heavily concentrated in the cities and large towns; but medium-sized towns were also involved from an early date. The Star Concert Room, Bolton, (population c.50,000 in 1841) was established as early as 1832 and by the early 1850s had an auditorium that could house a thousand people. Huddersfield (population c.34,000 in 1851) boasted the Cambridge Arms, with a similar capacity; Halifax (population c.37,000 in 1851) ‘the well-patronized Canterbury.’ In addition, there were smaller, pub-based, venues offering a range of musical entertainment (and more) in both towns.¹⁰ In cities and towns there was a pyramid of provision. At the top were establishments such as Morton’s Canterbury Hall in Lambeth, Pullan’s Music Hall in Bradford or Thornton’s Varieties in Leeds, but they co-existed with and were supported by a broader (and at times, distinctly seedy) base.¹¹

In many respects, this basic pattern continued until the late nineteenth century, more so outside London, but there

were significant changes in geographical and organisational terms.¹² The first wave of music-hall development had been largely centred on the towns and cities of the first industrial revolution. In the larger cities (Bradford or Leeds, for example) these were years of consolidation, while in the towns there was further expansion (such as the building of Rowley's Theatre of Variety in Huddersfield or Templeton's Varieties (later the Gaiety) in Halifax.¹³ More important were three locational shifts. First, was expansion of provision in growing urban centres associated with newer industries, such as Middlesbrough (iron and especially steel), St. Helens and Warrington (glass and chemicals), Coventry (light engineering) and Northampton (factory produced shoes). Second, seaside resorts became an important location of new music halls, developing in the context of class-based resort development. Brighton and Eastbourne catered for very different clienteles; as did Morecombe and Blackpool. Even within resorts there could be clear differentiation. Scarborough boasted a more genteel north bay and a more popular south bay. Even the small resort of Redcar had two piers, the one in Coatham for the more 'discerning' middle classes. Resort-based music halls were initially concentrated along the south coast of England. In the 1880s 80 per cent were to be found there but as other resorts developed this figure fell to 50 per cent by the 1910s. Overall the percentage of music halls to be found in seaside resorts rose from c.7 per cent to c.13 per cent between 1882 and 1912. The most important element was the expansion in working-class resorts from Southend to Yarmouth and Cleethorpes and, above all, Blackpool.¹⁴ Third, a further geographical concentration was to be found in the suburbs. The early twentieth century witnessed a dramatic increase in suburban halls in London. In 1900 there had been twenty-eight, less than a decade later the figure was forty-six, two-thirds of which were run by syndicates. The pattern was replicated on a smaller scale in Birmingham, Manchester, Leeds and Liverpool.

In organisational terms, the 1860s and 1870s saw a national network emerging. Initially, music halls relied upon local talent but the growing demand for variety, week on week, meant that artists worked in a wider regional and national

context. At the same time, especially with the emergence of the *Lions comiques*, the top-of-the-bill 'star' system came into being. The Great Vance was a regular performer in London, but most years went on tour. In 1867, as the star of Vance's Varieties, he and his 'pre-eminent Party ... [comprising] several popular talented *Artistes*, appeared at Thornton's Varieties, Leeds, Brown's Royal Music Hall, Glasgow, Oswald Stoll's Parthenon, Liverpool, Manchester Free Trade Hall and the Exchange Hall, Nottingham.¹⁵ George Leybourne's provincial tour of 1874, entitled "Past and Present," was directed grandly at 'the Principal Institutes, Lecture Rooms and Town halls in the Provinces.'¹⁶ The reality was somewhat different. They performed at St. George's Hall, Bradford, the Mechanics' Hall, Nottingham and Pullan's Music Hall, Bradford but also at the Alhambra Palace of Varieties, Stockton-on-Tees and the Oddfellows' Hall, Middlesbrough. By the end of the year he could boast of a provincial tour 'extending over 150 days' that had encompassed not only the great cities but also smaller places such as Barrow, Huddersfield, and Margate.

Such touring was not confined to the 'stars' of the music hall. Indeed, for lesser-known performers touring was essential to make a living; and the demands could be considerable. Alf George and Nelly Glover, hardly the best-known of music-hall artists, in the late-1860s appeared as 'The Cockneys on Their Travels' in venues across the south of England (Aldershot and Portsmouth), the east (Lincoln), the midlands (Kidderminster and Walsall), the north (Huddersfield, Leeds, Manchester and Preston) as well as Scotland (Glasgow, Dundee, Leith and as far north as Aberdeen). In all they were touring for 51 weeks in 1867. They, and other largely forgotten figures such as, the duettists, Thurnhill and Fothergill, Liskard the Musical Clown, and the Ricardo family, often performing in relatively unglamorous venues, contributed to the creation of a national popular culture in the third quarter of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

The most striking development from the 1880s onwards was the emergence of the syndicates, as the development of music hall entered a new phase that saw the emergence of theatre chains with their plush and spacious theatres.¹⁸ The best known, that of Edward Moss and Oswald Stoll, by the early twentieth century, comprised thirty-seven variety theatres.

Three-quarters were located across the cities and large towns of England, a quarter in London alone, with the London Hippodrome as its flagship. But they were not alone. Thomas Barrasford, Walter de Freece, Richard Thornton and Frank MacNaughten were important entrepreneurs, who reflected the new face of mass market, consumer-oriented capitalism in late-Victorian and Edwardian England.¹⁹ Syndicates facilitated the offer of a more uniform product, greater influence on content and tone, in a bid to appeal to a wider audience, and greater control over artistes, for whom a greater degree of continuity of employment was gained at the expense of tighter contracts, which contained control over material and barring clauses to reinforce loyalty. The new, purpose-built theatres that appeared, particularly in the decades from 1892 to 1912, with their fixed seating facing the stage, were fundamentally different from the earliest music halls, having more in common with the established theatres where audiences went to see a show. There was a distancing between performer and audience, but without the fourth wall of the theatre. The audience experience changed from a participatory role in the earlier years to a more passive one. This was reinforced by the introduction of twice-nightly performances and the turns system which necessitated tighter time management, and for performers, less scope for ad-libbing and interaction with the audience.

Smaller halls, offering entertainment maybe once or twice a week, from 7 or 8 p.m. to 11 p.m., declined in number, especially in London, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but never totally disappeared. In the mid-1860s there were around 375 licensed halls in the capital. In 1885 the number was around 200 and fell to about 150 a decade later. Much has been made of the impact of the newly created and energetic London County Council and organisations and individuals, such as the National Vigilance League and the formidable Mrs. Ormiston Chant but their impact can be exaggerated. The high-profile and oft-quoted campaign against the Empire, Leicester Square had mixed results. Such was the scale of opposition to the decision to withhold its licence that, after a brief period, during which some hasty internal reconfiguration saw the bar separated from the auditorium, the Empire reopened. Rather than highlighting its strength of,

the campaign revealed the ready availability of music venues and the importance of popular support and resistance. Health and safety considerations were more important, especially after the 1878 Building Regulations Act, but the decline of the smaller halls owed as much to the loss of support from below as to repression from above.²⁰

The importance of smaller venues was equally evident elsewhere.²¹ In Leeds in 1875, 362 music licenses were approved by the city's magistrates.²² Of this total, a mere five were for 'concert halls,' that is larger venues exclusively employing professional performers. Two, the Varieties and the Princess Palace, charged for entry and were described as 'halls of very considerable magnitude and frequented by large audiences.'²³ The other three 'concert halls,' the Angel, the Rose and Crown and the Seven Stars, were little better than the much-criticized 'free and easies' which actively encouraging audience members to drink. By far the largest group of licensed music providers were the 112 pub-based 'free and easies,' variously offering music and dancing once, twice, occasionally six times a week.²⁴ Provision was broadly similar elsewhere. In Manchester music halls, 'some large and some small ... [were] in every street, almost.'²⁵ J Greig, the head constable of Liverpool was more precise in identifying five music halls and 45 pubs and beerhouses licensed for music and dancing, but conceded that provision was much greater because 'the justices here have no power to prevent music and dancing in public houses, as long as good order is maintained.'²⁶

Local social observers added colour to the bald statistics. James Burnley, better known to the readers of the *Bradford Observer* as THE SAUNTERER, provided a vivid picture of the diversity and dynamism of musical entertainment in the city around 1870. He distinguished between those employing professionals and those 'conducted on the "free and easy" principle.' At the top of the hierarchy was the long-established Pullan's Music Hall, in which could be heard well-performed renditions of worthy songs, such as 'The Old Oak Tree, the Monarch of the Wood,' or 'The Sea is England's Glory.'²⁷ Even here there was evidence of worrying frivolity, not least 'a silly song about the Grecian Bend' and the band playing 'a tune modelled upon the air "The Cork Leg."²⁸ But worse was

to be found at singing saloons, such as the Unicorn, where customers in the first floor singing saloon were entertained with such delights as 'Cackle, Cackle, Cock-a-doodle-doo'²⁹ but this was as nothing compared with 'the still lower type of singing saloons' such as the 'Dissipation Hotel ... ostensibly a singing saloon but in reality ... a brothel [with] simply loathsome scenes of such shameless indecency' every night.³⁰

The decades around the turn of the twentieth century saw a decline in the number of smaller venues in cities like Leeds and Bradford, often due to their failure to meet stricter building standards. The licences of two long-established musical venues in Leeds, the Angel Inn, Briggate and the Beehive Inn, Vicar Lane, were not renewed because of narrow staircases and inadequate lavatorial provision.³¹ Overall, there was a striking degree of consensus regarding licensing in the city. Magistrates and police were largely in agreement; and, especially in the early 1900s, the police rarely opposed any applications for music licences. Nor was there any indication of serious popular dissatisfaction with the loss of licences. This was not always the case. In nearby Bradford, there were ongoing tensions between police and magistrates and popular hostility in the 1880s and 1900s. In the 1880s a reformist magistrates' clerk, much concerned with the employment of female pianists and itinerant musicians, was at the forefront of a campaign to restrict the number of licences. Although his fears about moral decay were shared by the chief constable, the latter's selective zeal in bringing objections led to a rift in reformist ranks.³² More importantly, accusations of 'the glaring injustices' committed by 'a few bigoted Pharisees,' reinforced magisterial resistance to police demands.³³ The issue flared up again in the early twentieth century, when a new chief constable started a 'crusade' against the smaller, older 'singing 'oils' [halls] in the city. As part of his campaign he produced the following statistics, which brought out the variations between (selected) cities, and purportedly revealed the scale of the problem in Bradford.³⁴

Table 1: Music and Dancing Licences - selected cities, 1902

City	Population, 1901	Music	Only	Music &	dancing	Total	Ratio – total/ population
		Pub	Other	Pub	Other		
Birmingham	522,000	44	7	3	26	80	1:6525
Liverpool	685,000	38	-	6	43	87	1:7784
Sheffield	381,000	114	-	2	20	136	1:2801
Leeds	429,000	113	9	7	54	183	1:2344
Nottingham	240,000	286	5	-	21	312	1:769
Bradford	280,000	361	14	2	16	313	1:895
Manchester	544,000	388	-	4	35	427	1:1274

Source: Report of the Chief Constable of Bradford, *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 29 January 1902

The ‘crusade’ was partly moral, partly pragmatic. The older venues, particularly, attracted ‘undesirables’ but were also structurally deficient. Before a packed courtroom, the chief constable opposed the renewal of forty music licences, the majority of which were well-known “singing oils” including such long-established and popular venues as the Albert Vaults, the Duchess of Kent and the King’s Head in the city centre.³⁵ This time the magistrates were largely sympathetic and upheld two-thirds of the police objections. The magistrates’ decisions were appealed, though finally upheld at the King’s Bench Division.³⁶ Popular hostility was short-lived. Expectations had changed in terms of safety and propriety. The existence of a bar in the same room as the entertainment, which would have been unexceptionable a generation earlier when many of these “singing oils” were first licensed, was no longer deemed appropriate. Further, there was a ready supply of venues with music licences in the city. As in London, it was lack of popular support that brought the demise of the smaller venues.

Singing saloons were not simply to be found in the cities. Often relatively small, singing rooms were to be found the

length and breadth of the country, from Preston to Portsmouth, from Settle to Yarmouth, co-existing with larger venues, their often-cheaper attractions prominently placarded in the streets.³⁷ They were also to be found in more rural settings, though most were rudimentary, in the words of one critic, little more than 'a room at the bar of a public house, with music at one end, and swearing at the other; they call it a saloon, but no respectable man and his wife could sit there for an hour.'³⁸

By the turn of the twentieth century, not least as the result of the emerging syndicates, the national network of performers had been considerably strengthened. London continued to exercise disproportionate influence, attracting local talent, like J W Rowley and Walter Stockwell, who had made their names, initially in the West Riding, later regionally in the north of England, before moving south. At the same time, the big names of the London halls, Albert Chevalier, Gus Elen and Marie Lloyd among others, were to be seen in the big provincial centres and less frequently in the smaller towns.

However, two important qualifications need to be made. First, strong local traditions, notably in the north east of England, co-existed with newer forms of musical entertainment. The Shades Saloon in Newcastle brought 'concerts to our toon [with] aw the great stars down frae London' but it also offered employment to 'Mr Edward Corven, [sic] a local singer and composer.'³⁹ Ned Corvan, aka 'Cat-Gut Jim,' performed mainly in the Tyneside area, though he appeared at least once in Leeds and even at Wilton's in London.⁴⁰ Much of the repertoire had a distinct local orientation – 'The Toon Improvement Bill,' 'The Sword Dancer's Lament, and 'In Memory of the Hartley Catastrophe' – reinforced by the use of dialect. At the same time, Corvan happily used tunes from minstrelsy and music hall for his songs. His 'Perils of the Mine, or the Collier's Death' was set to the tune of 'Zip Coon' and 'The Rise in Baccy' to 'The King of the Cannibal Islands.' Elsewhere, the Lancashire dialect poet, reciter and comedian, William Townsley, confined his performances to a narrow area on both sides of the Pennines, while the Halifax-born, John Hartley, dubbed the Yorkshire Burns, never left his home county.

Second, many aspiring national stars never made the breakthrough and remained local, at best regional stars; and

others simply did not aspire to be national figures. Ella Dean, one-time mistress and later wife of J W Rowley, aspired to be a national figure but never broke into the London scene and remained a well-liked regional star. Others cultivated a regional image and played to regional audiences. Silly Billy Elliot and Soft Tony Benson (later just the 'The Two Tykes'), were advertised as 'the greatest comedians that ever came from the county of broad acres,' and remained a popular act, but largely playing to audiences in the north of England.

Music Hall audiences

But who went to the music hall or singing saloon? Popular orthodoxy, the notion of a transition from 'pot-house to palace' between the 1850s and 1900s, carries with it a belief that early all-male 'rough' audiences were replaced by more 'respectable' and 'family' audiences. There is some qualitative, though not unbiased, evidence to support this notion of gradual embourgeoisement, but given the diversity of music halls and singing saloons, not to mention the limitations of evidence, determining audience composition is not straightforward.⁴¹

The music halls of London's West End were unusual in attracting people from across the social spectrum. Elsewhere in the capital the smaller halls, like many provincial halls outside the big cities, were essentially neighbourhood providers. Significantly, ambitious men like John Wilton and Charles Morton were unable to realize their dream of attracting a socially diverse audience, notwithstanding their extensive advertising. A visitor to the Canterbury observed a mixed audience:

The majority present are respectable mechanics or small tradesmen with their wives and daughters and sweethearts ... Now and then you see a few midshipmen or a few fast clerks and warehousemen, who confidentially inform each other that there is "no end of talent here."⁴²

Admittedly, occasionally there was a few of 'the class of unfortunates [prostitutes]' but there was none of 'the ragged children, hideous old women and drunken old men' to be found in the gin-palaces.⁴³ There were important variations in neighbourhood audiences. Few in Tower Hamlets would

have been able to pay 1s for a box at Wilton's in the 1860s; and even among the lower-priced seats there was a big difference between the cheapest (4d) and the dearest (8d).⁴⁴ Anstey's description of suburban music halls, written in the early 1890s, is not fundamentally different. There were 'young clerks and shop-boys ... [and] respectable young couples employed in neighbouring workshops and factories' and the 'vast majority are eminently respectable.' There were 'family parties' as well as 'several young girls with their sweethearts.' Although there were 'gay young clerks and local bloods' on the fringe of the audience, their presence was offset by a trusty old matron or two.⁴⁵

Provincial audiences reflected local occupational structures. Significant numbers were members of the cutlery trades in Sheffield, the textile industry in Manchester and the seafaring trades in Liverpool, though people were also drawn from a range of semi-skilled occupations. Unsurprisingly, young people comprised an important part of the audience, though this diminished somewhat in the early twentieth century.⁴⁶ In those towns or cities where there were opportunities for paid employment, women were more likely to attend. Contrary to popular fears, the women who did so were, with few exceptions, respectable. In the 1860s and 1870s, there was clear evidence of social diversity in the audiences of some music halls. The Victoria in Manchester, which charged either 2d or 3d for admission, was almost exclusively working-class, though this was hardly a homogenous category. The pricing policies of other Manchester halls, where admission prices could vary from 2d to 1s, suggests that there was a wider audience, encompassing people from lower middle-class occupations.⁴⁷ In Liverpool the picture was even more diverse. Some halls (the Constellation, the Crystal Palace, Griffith's and the Metropolitan) were free; the Colosseum's admission prices ranged from 1d to 6d; the Gaiety from 2d to 1s and the Star from 6d to 1s 6d.⁴⁸ Newspaper reports confirm this. The 1d pit in the Liverpool Colosseum 'was made up of working men of the lower class ... dock labourers and [other] labourers,' whereas artisans and sailors were to be found in the 6d. gallery.⁴⁹ The anonymous author of an article on 'Liverpool Life' published in 1857 noted that there were 'singing saloons for the upper, middle and lower classes [but] they are specially set apart for all these grades.'⁵⁰

Most singing saloons were provided for and frequented by members of the working classes for whom even a 3d music-hall ticket would have been prohibitive. Admission was free, or via the purchase of a token exchangeable for a drink. Frequently, singing saloons were described as 'notorious' with 'scenes of debauchery and crime ... [committed by] men, dirty, unshaven, drunk, blasphemous [and] women half-naked, riotous and obscene.'⁵¹ However, much of this material was written and published by people with a clear reformist agenda. It suited their purpose to paint lurid pictures of immorality and criminality but not all commentators were so critical. The Alexander Hall and Singing Saloon in Manchester was 'frequented by a very respectable class of working people.'⁵² Similarly, the chief constable of Leeds found little difference between the composition of the audiences in the city's big music halls and those attending singing saloons and even 'free and easies.'⁵³ Surveying 'poor people's music-hall in Lancashire at the turn of the twentieth century, Russell and Compagnac noted the preponderance of 'labourers, artisans, porters, navvies, street-sellers of all kind'. Although critical of the entertainment provided, they praised the members of the audiences as 'respectable and well-meaning folk; honest, straightforward, excellent workers and not deficient in ... humanity.'⁵⁴

The extent to which the advent of the syndicated music halls, especially away from city centres transformed audiences is easily overstated. Undoubtedly some new (or refurbished) music halls were more socially differentiated, as reflected in their pricing policies. The Tivoli, Manchester (the refurbished Alexandra) offered seats from 6d to 3s but also boxes from 10s 6d to £2; but the Tivoli was the exception to the rule.⁵⁵ Elsewhere there were some signs of social differentiation, The Pavilion, a suburban music hall in Lodge Lane, Liverpool, was a case in point. It was part of the Manchester-based Broadhead circuit, comprising a maximum of seventeen theatres and colloquially known as the 'Bread and Butter Tour.' Although the two shows per evening attracted different audiences, one lower middle class, the other more working class, both were drawn from the locality.⁵⁶

The geographical and social limitations of music hall

Not everyone could directly enjoy the new entertainment. There were significant parts of the country that were geographically distant from the nearest music hall. This was particularly true of smaller towns and villages in the lightly populated parts of Devon and Cornwall, East Anglia and Cumberland and Westmorland but also applied to 'industrialised' counties such as the West Riding of Yorkshire. For inhabitants of the villages of the Calder, Colne and Holme valleys opportunities were limited. In theory, they could avail themselves of the musical delights of Leeds and Bradford, or even Huddersfield and Halifax, but in practice it is unlikely that many made the journey. Infrequently, touring companies, appearing in one of the towns or cities, might travel to nearby villages.⁵⁷ Occasionally, a small music hall sprang up locally, though the entertainment at a 'well-attended' music hall in Sowerby Bridge in 1870, on closer examination, turned out to comprise a female pianist and two female singers, one aged six.

Furthermore, even in well-provided towns and cities there remained a significant part of the population for whom even a visit to a smaller music hall was beyond their means, but this is not to say that they were not influenced by the new culture. With plagiarism rife, it was not uncommon for songs to be performed not just in the smaller halls but also, and perhaps more importantly, in other venues, such as public houses (licensed or not), singing saloons, and working men's clubs as well as in pleasure gardens and on the street or beach. Commenting in 1867 on the Great Vance's new song, 'He's a Pal o' Mine,' an anonymous contributor to *Era* was convinced it was 'sure to take as prominent a part in street minstrelsy as the other ditties he has made so famous.'⁵⁸ A quarter of a century later, Anstey made effectively the same point. Of the twenty or thirty songs sung at each music hall each year, 'perhaps two or three a year will catch the popular favour, be played on barrel-organs, whistled by street boys, adapted for burlesques and pantomimes, and overrun the entire country in a marvellous short time, until it palls upon the very villagers.'⁵⁹ A somewhat dismayed Flora Thompson noted how the latest 1890s music-hall hit ('Ta-Ra-Ra-Boom-De-Ay') spread through the countryside like an epidemic to be taken up by the villagers of Candleford Green.

[T]he words and tune swept the countryside like an epidemic. Ploughman bawled it at the plough-tail, harvesters sang it in the harvest fields, workmen in villages painted the outside of houses to its measure, errand boys whistled it and schoolchildren yelled it. Even housewives ... would attempt a tired little imitation of the high kick as they turned from the clothes-lines in their gardens singing ‘Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay.’⁶⁰

Nowhere was safe. In the West Riding of Yorkshire, the Honley Feast of 1893 featured long-established attractions, the inevitable ‘fat woman [and] wonders of the deep sea ... shooting galleries, cocoanut stalls and pea shows’ and the village’s highly successful brass band; but there was no escaping the new, popular music as ‘[t]he organs attached to the roundabouts merrily ground out all the latest popular music hall songs.’⁶¹

Some concluding observations

Music hall, broadly defined, was a central and dynamic element in Victorian and Edwardian commercialised popular leisure as well as being an important source of employment for a range of people needed to ensure the efficient production and delivery of on-stage performance. By the end of the nineteenth century it was entertainment ‘for the people, but without entirely ceasing to be ‘of the people,’ particularly in the smaller venues. But it did not exist alone; it was part of a rich and diverse culture of popular music-making. Nor did it reach all; geography and economics limited direct access. Before looking more closely at the entertainment it offered, particularly its songs, we must turn our attention to popular dance.

Endnotes

- 1 The concerns were exaggerated and overlooked the extent to which ‘improving’ music was incorporated into music-hall entertainment, as will become clear later.
- 2 See also the attempts to bring improving music to the poorest in society via people’s concerts and street-and-alley concerts.

- 3 D Russell, *Popular music in England, 1840-1914: A social history*, Manchester University Press, 1987, chapter 10. See also J Hargreaves, *Every Valley Shall Be Exalted: Halifax Choral Society, 1818-2018*, Huddersfield, D&M Heritage Press, 2019.
- 4 Russell, *Popular music*, p.162 and chapter 9 *passim*. See also T Herbert, ed., *Bands: The Brass Band Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1999, T Herbert, 'The Repertory of a Victorian Brass Band,' *Popular Music*, 9(1), 1990, pp.117-32, A M Wilkinson, 'The Social and Cultural History of Black Dyke Mills Band, c.1900 to c.1970,' unpublished D.Phil., Leeds Metropolitan University, 2013 and S Etheridge, 'Southern Pennine Brass Bands and the Creation of Northern Identity, c.1840-1914,' *Northern History*, 54(2), 2017, pp.244-61.
- 5 Elgar, *Severn suite for brass band* and Holst *Moorside Suite*.
- 6 C O'Reilly, "'We Have Gone Recreation Mad": The Consumption of Leisure and Popular Entertainment in Municipal Parks in Early Twentieth Century Britain,' *International Journal of Regional and Local History*, 8(2), 2013, pp.112-28
- 7 See S Eydmann, 'The Life and Times of the Concertina,' chapter 8 'Concertina Bands,' at <http://www.concertina.com/eydmann/life-and-times/index.htm> and A Smith, *An Improbable Centenary: The Life and Times of the Slaithwaite Philharmonic Orchestra, 1891-1990*, Salford, Revell & George, 1990. Slawit also had its own brass band.
- 8 This is borne out by a range of anecdotal, including family, evidence but see Russell, *Popular music*, especially p.148.
- 9 See particularly P Bailey, *Leisure and Class in Victorian England: rational recreation and the contest for control, 1830-1885*, London, Methuen, 1978, P Bailey, ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986, J S Bratton, ed., *Music Hall: Performance and Style*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1986 and D Kift, *Victorian music hall: culture, class and conflict*, Cambridge University Press, 1996.
- 10 For the Star see R Poole, *Popular Leisure and the Music Hall in 19th-Century Bolton*, University of Lancashire, Centre for North-West Regional Studies, Occasional papers, No. 12, 1982 and Bailey, *Leisure and class*. The comments on Huddersfield and Halifax are based on an analysis of the local press in an unpublished paper. This revises the earlier interpretation of Russell who argued that places such as Huddersfield and Halifax 'had to wait until the 1880s for their first halls,' while for Dewsbury and Keighley the wait lasted until the 1900s.
- 11 Bailey, *Leisure and Class*, has a one-line reference to the threatened 'small fry in the provinces,' (p.150) and only discusses their London counterparts in terms of their decline (p.149) He acknowledged 'the ruck of complementary institutions' in his introduction to *Business of Pleasure* (p.ix) but still downplays the fluidity of the boundary between music hall and singing saloon. Russell, *Popular music*, (p.78) notes the persistence of small-scale enterprises 'virtually indistinguishable from the concert-rooms and halls of the 1850s and 1860s but elsewhere implies that singing saloons rapidly fell away in the face of the expansion of music hall. Kift, *Victorian music hall* acknowledges the

- continuance of pub-based music-halls, but her focus is restricted to the cities and large towns.
- 12 The following section draws heavily on CA J Crowhurst, 'The Music Hall 1885-1922. The Emergence of a National Entertainment Industry,' unpublished PhD, University of Cambridge, 1992.
 - 13 The Northern Theatre Company took over the Grand and the Royal in Halifax in the late 1890s and opened the Huddersfield Hippodrome in 1905. A rival chain, the MacNaughten Vaudeville circuit ran the People's Palace in Halifax and the Palace in Huddersfield.
 - 14 Resorts were a further example of the co-existence of older and new forms of entertainment. For an aspiring but impecunious music-hall performer, such as Gus Elen, a trip to Margate or Ramsgate during the season, provided an opportunity to gain experience and develop a persona, which enhanced his appeal to music-hall agents. At the same time, he brought, albeit second-hand, elements of London music hall and minstrelsy to a new audience.
 - 15 In addition, he performed in Belfast and Dublin. Information from *Era*.
 - 16 *Era* 26 April 1874
 - 17 See also the emergence of the agent, whose role was greatly enhanced with the development of syndicated theatres from the 1880s onwards.
 - 18 The legislative framework was provided by the 1856 Joint Stock Companies Act.
 - 19 Pioneering texts include W H Fraser, *The Coming of the Mass Market, 1850-1914*, London, Macmillan, 1981, J Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain*, London, Longmans, 1994 but see also P Gurney, *The Making of Consumer Culture in Modern Britain*, London, Bloomsbury, 2017.
 - 20 S Pennybacker, "'It was not what she said but the way in which she said it.'" The London County Council and the Music Halls,' in Bailey ed., *Music Hall: The Business of Pleasure*, pp.118-40 for a critical view of P Summerfield, 'The Effingham Arms and the Empire: Deliberate Selection in the Evolution of Music Hall in London,' in E & S Yeo, eds., *Popular Culture and Class Conflict*, Hemel Hempstead, Harvester Press, 1981, pp.209-40. See also Kift, *Victorian music hall*, p.162.
 - 21 Establishing the precise number of music providers is problematic, not least because of the number of venues that were unregulated or ignored local licensing requirements. Nonetheless, the number of licences granted for music provides a useful starting point.
 - 22 Chief Constable's annual report in *Leeds Mercury*, 8 January 1876
 - 23 *Leeds Mercury*, 8 January 1876
 - 24 There were twelve in the neighbourhood of Kirkgate, attracting a combined audience of 2000 to 3000 on Saturdays and similar numbers around Briggate. 245 licences, or two-thirds of the total, were for occasional use only, such as band practices and birthday celebrations. The situation could change from year to year. The following year magistrates and police in Leeds took a firmer stance against poorly conducted 'free and easies,' reducing their number to fifty-two and only two concert halls. However, the magistrates still approved music and dancing licenses for 100 public houses and 141 beerhouses. *Leeds Mercury*, 5 January 1877.
 - 25 Select Committee on Theatrical Licences, 1866, (305), QQ.6171, 6191, 6207, 6374-5

- 26 S C on Theatrical Licences, QQ. 6974-9, 6982, 6997 and 7000. A similar pattern is found in Birmingham. See the detailed reports of the Birmingham licensing sessions reported in the *Birmingham Daily Post*, 29 August 1863 and 4 September 1865.
- 27 The former was written by J W Cherry, the latter by J W Lake and was later included in collections of national songs.
- 28 Although dating from the 1820s, the Grecian Bend enjoyed a fashion revival in the late 1860s and was the subject of several popular songs. The best-known reference is in ‘The Gardens Where the Praties Grow’ where the ‘lovely colleen’ walks without a Grecian bend. ‘The Cork Leg’ was a well-known nonsense song, dating from c.1850 that had been sung by Sam Cowell, among others.
- 29 Another nonsense song that appeared in broadside form.
- 30 *Bradford Observer*, 26 May 1870
- 31 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 11 January 1895
- 32 *Bradford Observer*, 19 January and 9 February 1882
- 33 *Bradford Observer*, 27 January 1882. The police felt they had ‘simply wasted their breath.’
- 34 The statistics are of limited use, not least because they make no reference to capacity.
- 35 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 21 and 29 January 1902
- 36 *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 29 January and 1 May 1902 and *Manchester Courier*, 31 January 1902
- 37 Reporting in the local press suggests a falling off in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, but some are still to be found in the early twentieth century.
- 38 SC Theatrical Licences, Q.5388 evidence of W T Simpson
- 39 D Harker, *Cat-Gut Jim the Fiddler: Ned Corvan’s Life and Songs*, Newcastle, Wisecrack Publications, 2017, p.15 and p.19
- 40 Corvan was not alone in this respect. Joe Wilson, ‘probably the most popular Tyneside vocalist in “the North,”’ confined himself to the north east of England and particularly to Newcastle and its immediate environs. Wilson’s performances were heavily concentrated in Newcastle and local towns such as Jarrow and North and South Shields but he travelled as far south as Bishop Auckland, Darlington, Middlesbrough and Stockton. Carlisle, where he appeared on several occasions, was an exception.
- 41 Price policy gives some indication of the expected audience, but the most direct evidence comes from the disasters (fires, panics etc) reported in detail in the local press.
- 42 J E Ritchie, *The Night Side of London*, London, William Tweedie, 1857, p.70. He explained the absence of drunkenness and obscene songs to the presence of women.
- 43 Ritchie, *Night Side*, pp.70 and 71
- 44 Figures from Kift, *Victorian music hall*, table 1, p.63
- 45 F Anstey, ‘London Music Halls,’ *Harper’s New Monthly Magazine*, January 1891. This was also the view of the London County Council inspector, commenting specifically on the audience at the Canterbury. Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.63

- 46 Of the 34 fatalities at the Victoria music hall, Manchester panic in 1868, two-thirds (23) were aged between 15 and 21. A further 10 were aged between 10 and 14. Kift, *Victorian music hall*, p.65
- 47 The admission prices of two large halls, the London (2000 capacity) and the Alexandra (1500 capacity) ranged from 6d to 1s, considerably more expensive than the Victoria (capacity 2000) and the People's Music Hall (capacity 3000). Kift, *Victorian music hall*, p.67
- 48 Kift, *Victorian music hall*, p.67
- 49 *Liverpool Daily Albion*, 3 December 1877 cited in Kift, *Victorian Music Hall*, p.66. A similar pattern was discernible at other halls, such as the Alexandra in Manchester and the Parthenon in Liverpool.
- 50 'Liverpool Life' 2nd series, no. xiv, *Liverpool Mercury*, 23 February 1857
- 51 R. Davis, Pershore Mutual Improvement Society quoted in *Barrow's Worcester Journal*, 31 May 1849 and anon. 'Liverpool Life: Its Pleasures, Practices and Pastimes,' no. xiii, *Liverpool Mercury*, 15 September 1856
- 52 *Manchester Times*, 11 September 1869
- 53 In his eyes the audiences were all 'very much of the same class of persons,' *Leeds Mercury*, 8 January 1875
- 54 C E B Russell & E T Compagnac, 'Poor People's Music Halls in Lancashire,' *Economic Review*, vol. x, 1900, pp.289-308 at p.291 and p.297
- 55 Kift, *Victorian music hall*, p.68. A similar policy was adopted by the Palace Music Hall where seats could cost as much as 5s and boxes as much as two guineas.
- 56 E Loudon, 'Performing the Popular: The Context and Composition of a Liverpool Music Hall,' unpublished Ph.D., University of Liverpool, 2011, esp. chapter 4.
- 57 The villages of Honley, Holmfirth and Marsden, for example, were visited by touring companies booked for a week in Huddersfield. For details see *Huddersfield Chronicle* 24 December 1873, 3 November 1887 and 14 February 1900.
- 58 *Era*, 6 January 1867
- 59 F Anstey, 'London Music Halls,' *Harper's New Monthly Magazine*, January 1891
- 60 F Thompson, *Lark Rise to Candleford*, Penguin, London, 1973 (1st published 1939), p.501
- 61 *Huddersfield Chronicle*, 30 September 1893