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The Soundproof Study: Victorian Professionals, Work Space, and Urban Noise

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I

Late in October 1864, during a dinner with family and friends, Charles Dickens received a telegram that read simply “LEECH DEAD.” Marcus Stone, a guest at the dinner, later recalled: “[S]ilence fell upon us. [. . .] No one said a word. What was there to say?” (qtd. in Kaplan, Dickens 450). In the following weeks, as Dickens struggled to complete another monthly installment of Our Mutual Friend (1864–65), he wrote to John Forster: “I have not done my number. This death of poor Leech (I suppose) has put me out woefully. Yesterday and the day before I could do nothing; seemed for the time to have quite lost the power; and am only by slow degrees getting back into the track to-day” (Letters 10: 447). Dickens’s biographers have described this passage as a “cry of personal lamentation,” a sign that Dickens felt “desiccated, unable to work” after the death of John Leech, his close friend and, more famously, his illustrator for the 1843 A Christmas Carol (Johnson 2: 1017; Kaplan, Dickens 451). But as the letter to Forster indicates, the death of Leech caused Dickens more than “personal” pain, for it also brought on a momentary professional crisis. Leech’s death temporarily stopped Dickens’s hand and silenced him.

That the passing of Leech brought such silence is ironic, since what precipitated his death was noise. The sounds of the city—clanging bells, cracking whips, clattering carriages, clamoring hawkers and cabmen, roaring crowds, howling dogs—all these regularly accosted Leech and other Londoners, but the worst of all offenders scattered about the streets were the itinerant musicians. Dickens called them “brazen performers on brazen instruments, beaters of drums, grinders of organs, bangers of banjos, clashers of cymbals, worriers of fiddles, and bellowers of ballads” (Letters 10: 388). The cacophony of such street musicians nearly drove Leech mad, interrupting his work at home and exacerbat-
ing his already serious heart condition and nervous temperament. His final words to fellow artist William Powell Frith indicate the depth of his misery: "Rather, Frith, than continue to be tormented in this way, I would prefer to go to the grave where there is no noise" (qtd. in Frith 2: 297). Days later, Leech got his wish, bringing him the quiet he felt he had been unjustly denied in life.

In his antipathy toward street music in Victorian London, Leech had plentiful company. Throughout the city, artisans, academics, musicians, clergymen, and doctors shared Leech’s suffering and railed against what one author of a leading article from a May 1856 *Times* called “the noisy, dizzy, scatterbrain atmosphere of London” (9). As tempers flared, the fight against the oppression of street noises mounted in print and Parliament. With predictable indignation, another *Times* leader declared for the exasperated many that “there is no London nuisance equal to that of out-door music! [..] O for a little quiet in London!” (2 July 1860, 8-9). The prolonged war of words and images that ensued not only prompted new legal restrictions upon music-makers, but also accelerated what Peter Bailey has recently identified as “a continuing struggle between refinement and vulgarity” (“Breaking” 206). This battle revealed a segment of the Victorian middle classes in the process of making one of its more elaborate, forceful efforts toward collective action and self-definition.

Beginning at mid-century, advocates of the anti-street music movement waged a battle to impose silence upon the terrain outside. But against the more typical objections to street music as a domestic disturbance, the complaints of a distinct segment of the middle classes stood out: those who worked inside their homes. Street music presented a specific challenge to this burgeoning professional caste—to “[t]he writer, the artist, the calculator, the comparative anatomist, the clergyman composing his sermon, the scientific man his treatise” (Collins 180). Urban street culture posed a particular threat to these workers because, unlike members of the more established professions, they lacked a separate, official workplace that affirmed their vocational status. Indeed, their fierce assault on musical nuisances during this period represented more than merely another attempt by the middle classes to sanitize urban streets in the tradition of the 1839 Metropolitan Police Act. Rather, their condemnation of street music drew attention to their own fledgling and curious status as housebound professionals, workers whose place of rest doubled as their place of labor.

Thomas Carlyle’s renowned attack on noise served as a kind of
overture to those that followed. Carlyle’s long-standing aversion to noises of all kinds, ranging from piano-playing neighbors to crowing roosters and chickens, is legendary (Holme 58–76). By 1853, nearly two decades after moving to Cheyne Row in Chelsea, the “unprotected Male” had had enough of “Demon Fowls” and other disturbances to issue bloodthirsty responses in defense of his territory: “Those Cocks must either withdraw or die. [ ... ] That is a fixed point; —and I must do it myself if no one will help” (qtd. in Froude 519, 522). He reserved special venom for his nemesis, a “vile yellow Italian” organ-grinder: “The question arises, whether to go out and, if not assassinate him, call the Police upon him, or to take myself away to the bath-tub and the other side of the house? Of course, I ought to choose the latter” (Froude 519; qtd. in Kaplan, Carlyle 367). “All summer I have been more or less annoyed with noises, even accidental ones, which get free access through my open windows,” he wrote later that year, as his limited patience reached its end (qtd. in Holme 94). For Carlyle, to rest, but more importantly, to work at home depended upon denying outdoor commotion “access” to interior space.

Carlyle’s solution to the problem made spatially evident the complications that many Victorian intellectuals in London faced as they struggled for both professional differentiation and quiet. Carlyle sought to create a work space that outside sounds could not infiltrate, a sanctum in which he could go on to write Frederick the Great (1858–65). Although the idea of a soundproof attic study had occurred to him at least ten years earlier, events of 1853 revived his hope in it: “Masons (who have already killed a year of my life, in a too sad manner), are again upon the roof of the house,—after a dreadful bout of resolution on my part,—building me a SOUNDLESS ROOM! ‘The world, which can do me no good, shall at least not torment me with its street and backyard noises’” (qtd. in Froude 521). With its double walls, skylights, and new slated roof with muffling air chambers beneath, the room itself signified a professional seizure of domestic space, an architectural tactic that encapsulated the oddly positioned existence of silence-seeking professionals whose living and working spaces overlapped.

Scholars have not fully attended either to the unique spatial status of these members of Victorian urban society or to the ramifications of that status for their sense of professional identity. And yet, as Dickens had his son-in-law write in the midst of the battle over street noise, “surely the class of which such individuals as these form the com-
ponent parts, is scarcely a small, and still less an unimportant one” (Col-\lins 180). In her formative study of the Victorian home, Jenni Calder writes of the drive for middle-class members to escape urban realities and attain a degree of separateness and self-definition within the home: “There was dirt, there was noise, there was human excrement, there was starvation, there was crime, there was violence [in the urban world]. [. . .] To have an interior environment that enabled such things to be forgotten was a priority of middle-class aspiration” (15). Yet Carlyle could not maintain such solid boundaries between the home and outside world, because his home itself incorporated the professional’s typically separate and distinct place of work. Other writers, artists, and those performing what was considered “brain-work” might not have had the means to afford such a lavish project—Carlyle’s silent room cost £170 to construct—but they shared many of the same anxieties over street noise, vocation, and space that provoked Carlyle to erect the insulated study at the top of his house.

Changing productions and conceptions of noise have tended to be overlooked, or more precisely, underheard, in standard social and literary histories, but there are signs this is starting to change, as scholars such as Alain Corbin and Bruce Smith have now begun reconstructing “auditory landscapes” of the past to discern “the elaboration of collective and territorial identities” (Corbin x, xii). Along similar lines, Jacques Attali’s politicized history of music remains a provocative study of the relations between sound and power, and offers a theoretical perspective from which to consider the street music problem. Together, the work of Attali and Corbin suggest that the anti-street music attacks in Victorian London were part of an urban territorial campaign, a conflict for control between regions of quiet and dissonance. Such conflicts often have manifested themselves in legal action, for, as Attali writes, “the institutionalization of the silence of others assure[s] the durability of power” (8). More polemically, he asserts that noise “is violence: it disturbs. To make noise is to interrupt a transmission, to disconnect, to kill. It is a simulacrum of murder” (26). Attali’s claim captures the underlying message of Leech’s final words to Frith, in which the ailing artist expressed his belief that he was being violently driven to the only quiet place left him. And in Attali’s terms, Carlyle’s soundproof chamber institutionalized silence to “assure the durability” of the author’s literary ability and power.1

While Attali offers a compelling theory of the relationship be-
tween sound and silence, that theory only serves as a starting point for my discussion of professionals and urban noise. Indeed, the ongoing battles over sounds in Victorian London were conceptually as well as concretely territorial. Even as homeowners sought to remove music from the streets of the city, their endeavors revealed the conventional fears that, as critics have so often observed, middle-class Victorians so often expressed: a nationalist longing to defend English culture from the taint of foreign infiltration; a corporeal concern to protect bodies from the debilitating effects of urban life; and greatest of all, a fierce desire to uphold economic and social divisions between the lower and middle classes. But the spread of noise within urban spaces provoked more intriguing, less-discussed anxieties for artistic, literary, and intellectual professionals, including Leech, Carlyle, and Dickens, who heard in it a powerful threat not just to their rest, but to their work. Studying the fracas over street music therefore permits a new way to observe and understand the tensions this class of laborers faced as they came into their own during the middle- and later-nineteenth century.

II

To refer to the anti-street music attacks as such is perhaps misleading, for generally speaking, they were directed less against all outdoor music and performers than at certain types of music and its players. Isolated published indictments of London street musicians appeared as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century, but the frequency of the reports rose significantly in the 1840s, when The Times began to print complaints against street noise on a regular basis. Scholars have noted that “the decibel count seemed to have increased from mid-century on” in London streets, in part from higher rates of immigration and commercial growth; as one historian notes, street trading in the 1840s and 1850s was “augmented by a rare audibility” (Winter 71; Green 138; see also Sponza 163–65). In London Labour and the London Poor (1851), Henry Mayhew describes the array of nationalities of what he estimates are upwards of one thousand street musicians in London, including English violin-players and street bands, Irish and Scotch pipers, a German brass-bandsman, a French hurdy-gurdy-player, a host of Italian street entertainers, and numerous percussionists and minstrel-singers from England, India, and the United States (3: 158–204). The increasing number and variety of musicians throughout the 1850s led
to an escalation of published letters of attack and the first appearance, in an 1851 Times headline, of the phrase “organ nuisance” to designate the larger problem of noisy street music (“Medicus” 6). This move by The Times allowed the press and public to simplify a larger problem by singling out a particular type of performer upon which to place blame for the interruptions of daily life. The street music nuisance of the 1840s resolved itself, through this synecdoche, into the “organ-grinding nuisance” of the 1850s and 1860s, and Italian organ-grinders came to be seen as the repulsive source of most noise in the city, and their eradication the task of every “Friend of Tranquillity” (Bass 78–79).2

This development was complicated by the fact that a number of the outraged had legitimate grievances against those street musicians who in essence used extortion to make their living. Street music had few defenders, and these could do little to offset the quantity of outbursts of the incensed majority. In his London (1841), Charles Knight published an early defense in response to the Metropolitan Police Act, which attempted to legislate street noise. Knight openly sympathized with the musicians; street music, he wrote, “ought now to be left alone, if it cannot be encouraged by the State” (142). Over two decades later, during the 1864 street music debates in Parliament, aristocratic MPs spoke out on behalf of the working classes, paternalistically claiming that doing away with organ-grinders would deprive the poor of one of their few forms of entertainment. Also that year, the journal Good Words published a short article sympathetic to the organ-grinders, claiming that they were “discoursing the best music of the day, and educating the ear of hundreds for a few halfpence” (“A Paterfamilias” 698).

Such minor and infrequent defenses failed to counteract the prevailing hostility to street music. Sympathy for the musicians was further hampered by reports of extortion. To get certain organ-grinders to stop playing or go elsewhere, a noticeable segment of the complainants regularly had to pay them off, and this understandably only fueled the anger against them. Additionally, and perhaps of greater significance, the grinders, many of whom had only a rudimentary command of English, were for the most part not able to speak, let alone publish, for themselves. Indeed, with the exception of interviews by a few journalists and some scant police reports, the words and sentiments of the musicians, when noted at all, were presented by intermediaries whose antipathy, fear, and ignorance shaped their depictions.

Charles Manby Smith was one of the first authors to single out
the organ-grinders for their particular brand of disturbance. In “Music-Grinders of the Metropolis” (1851), Smith used terms that others soon adopted: grinders are “incarnate nuisances who fill the air with discordant and fragmentary mutilations and distortions of heaven-born melody, to the distraction of educated ears and perversion of the popular taste” (197). As calls for legislation increased during the late 1850s and into the 1860s, insults directed at the “organ nuisance” became more pointed, with many characterizing the musicians as aliens who were less than human, indeed, bestial. Editorials in the Examiner consistently characterized the musicians as no better than degenerates, as “blackguard Savoyards and herds of German swine,” “with sounds like those of a pig, to which they are so near akin” (qtd. in Bass 70, 92). Likewise, a writer for the City Press commented that the musicians were “as filthy in speech as in looks [. . .] they howl like so many apes and baboons escaped from the Zoological Gardens, and looking [sic] much like these creatures too.” The only way to deal with escaped wild animals, the author concluded, was to hunt them down: “[N]o Londoner should sally forth to business without first spiking, or hanging, or shooting one of the howlers of the streets” (qtd. in Bass 109–10). Depicting the musicians as filthy and bestial, and ultimately urging urban self-defense, this position drew upon language of the hunt and demonstrated the persistence of territorial concerns, of metaphors of invasion and containment, in the gathering opposition to street music.

Against these dismissals of street music as an invasive disturbance, the notion of territory took on increasingly peculiar meanings for the authors, artists, and philosophers just beginning to seek greater public respect and privileges as a professional class. Their attacks reflected the unusual difficulty of distinguishing their newfound socioeconomic turf from their homes. To understand what makes their allegations distinctive, consider for a moment this more conventional complaint from one Victor Baune, a City worker who lived on Philpot Lane:

I go home from the City, the brain overwrought, feverish, and fatigued, and I require rest and change of occupation—reading, writing, music—and these are impossible with the horrible street music from all sides—the very atmosphere impregnated with that thrice-cursed droning noise—that abomination of London which makes me ill, which positively shortens my life from the nervous fever which it engenders. (qtd. in Bass 8–9)

While engaging widespread Victorian notions of invalidism, Baune’s
horror at street music derives from a sense of entitlement and expectation in the domestic sphere. The “change of occupation” he describes plays on the dual sense of “occupation”: as career and of space. For Baune, as for those in other established middle-class professions such as medicine and law, work and rest occupy different spaces. As Leonore Davidoff has noted, this was a period when most professional men divided their time between increasingly distinct arenas of home and office: “Men, especially middle-class men, had to leave the home for the struggles of the marketplace, or to take their part in the armed services, the Church, and politics” (92). After a day of tiring business in the City, the home became the place for leisure, the “reading, writing, music” necessary for maintaining one’s middle-class propriety, respectability, and identity. In assaulting the hearth, the “abomination” of organ-grinding denied Baune and others like him the pursuit of “rest” so essential to the lives of proper gentlemen. Yet for many families, “the separation of work from home was far from total” (Tosh 17). Indeed, for professionals lacking offices in the City, the territorial distinctions so critical to Baune and to the men Davidoff describes did not apply. The challenge street musicians presented to them was all the greater, since it put not just one but two principal components of their identities—labor and leisure—at risk, a double affront to their status.3

This loose federation of middle-class professionals was just coming into its own at the middle of the century, increasing in numbers but still struggling for respect and recognition. The 1850s and 1860s were a transitional period for all the professions, as the growing size and wealth of society brought a corresponding need for professional services, which consequently underwent rapid expansion. Census reports indicate that the number of physicians grew by over half from 1861 through 1901, while the number of teachers more than doubled, of authors and editors more than tripled, and of actors more than quadrupled (Gourvish 14, 20). As W. J. Reader comments, the watershed Medical Act of 1858, which created a national registry of doctors, “went a long way towards establishing the approved pattern of a Victorian profession, whether in medicine or in any other occupation that aspired to equal dignity” (66). But medicine, like law, was a well-established field; it would require similar legal and bureaucratic developments across a wider spectrum before authors, artists, actors, and academics could enjoy a similar level of prestige. These developments included issuing royal charters, instituting field-specific examinations, and creating or-
ganizations designed “to raise status, financial rewards and occupational security by means of differentiation, regulation, and an emphasis on the gentlemanly virtues of education and middle-class morality” (Gourvish 32).

And yet this transitional period heightened professional insecurity, as authors, artists, and the like attempted to form and protect their collective identity. For none of these professions “could you lay down exact qualifications: still less could you erect an examination ladder” (Reader 148). Further, such professionals generally found themselves at the bottom of a hierarchy based on wealth and income, beneath more financially secure practitioners of medicine and law. Thus, for many artistic and literary professionals in the 1850s and 1860s, access to privilege and status remained uncertain, if not unlikely. Those aspiring to respectability needed to fight aggressively to mark their territory as professionals, to define themselves as industrious intellectuals who ranked above manual laborers, who could stand alongside doctors, lawyers, and the military, and who were equally worthy of deference, legislative action, and, of course, quiet. Street noise challenged this territorial concern at its problematic core: these workers defended their rights not from within distant offices, but from inside their homes.

More problematic still, the home in which these male professionals tried to work had been newly feminized: now that the home “no longer had to serve as shop, workshop, or office it could be devoted to essentially female purposes—the care and nurture of children, the entertainment of friends and guests, the management of familial and matrimonial affairs” (Burnett 113; see also Davidoff and Hall 364-69). What is more, Victorians also were beginning to endorse gendered conceptions of levels of sound. Women were increasingly “socialised as the quieter if not silent sex,” while “bravura noise-making was an essential signal of masculine identity for much of this era” (Bailey, “Breaking” 209). The middle-class Victorian man who embarked on a home-based occupation requiring silence had, it would seem, quite an uphill battle if he were to convey the separateness and, indeed, noisiness of masculinity. Carlyle, for one, hoped his soundproof room would demarcate a newly masculinized space reserved for the sounding of his own writerly voices within his house, partly out of his acute fear of effeminacy. Norma Clarke has written perceptively of Carlyle’s early anxieties over “the uncertainly gendered social identity which literature might bring with it,” and his consequent need, in On Heroes and Hero-Worship (1841), to provide “a con-
struction of the literary worker that excluded women from the definition" (26, 41). The "strenuous idleness" of the male writer is intrinsically unstable, and Carlyle’s soundproof study, built years after On Heroes, makes that instability concrete (Clarke 41). Reinforcing a fragile masculine professionalism by enforcing (an allegedly) feminized silence within a feminized domestic space was an uncertain proposition at best, and it should come as little surprise that an architectural resolution of this messy problem turned out to be delusory. “The ‘sound-proof room’ was a flattering delusion of an ingenious needy builder, for which we afterwards paid dear,” Carlyle later wrote. The room was “by far the noisiest in the house,” “a kind of infernal ‘miracle’ to me then and ever since” (qtd. in J. Carlyle, Letters and Memorials 230).

At the very least, a consideration of Carlyle’s responses to noisy disturbances complicates standard generalizations from this period about correspondences among space, sound, and gender. What is telling in this regard is his wife Jane’s quite different response to the building of the soundproof study. While Thomas had gone abroad to escape the noise of the builders, Jane stayed behind to oversee their work. She writes:

The tumult has been even greater since Mr. C. went than it was before; for new floors are being put down in the top story, and the noise of that is something terrific. But now that I feel the noise and dirt and disorder with my own senses, and not through his as well, it is amazing how little I care about it. Nay, in superintending all these men I begin to find myself “in the career open to my particular talents,” and am infinitely more satisfied than I was in talking “wits,” in my white silk gown with white feathers in my head. [. . .] The fact is, I am remarkably indifferent to material noises. [. . .] And when Mr. C. is not here recognising it with his overwhelming eloquence, I can regard the present earthquake as something almost laughable. (New Letters 36-37)

Left to fend for herself in the genteel woman’s traditional sphere of influence, Jane was, literally, at home in noise, albeit interior forms of noise. Or, rather, what Thomas insisted on attacking as noise, his wife came to perceive as the necessary and innocuous bustle of constructing and managing a home, the working sounds, so to speak, of one facet of her profession: “To see something going on, and to help its going on, fulfills a great want of my nature,” Jane wrote to her husband (Letters and Memorials 175). While Jane was not cavalier about the nuisances that bothered Thomas, their contrary perceptions do indicate the difference between the socially-defined labor of the homemaker, who
oversaw the often noisy inhabitants and affairs of her house, and the hushed sound of the isolated author at work under her roof, who socialized within “the huge whirl pool of noise” made, as it were, by the silent voices inside his books and head (Letters 697).

While Carlyle’s struggle became well-known in London, the task of swaying a professional scholarly community against a common enemy fell to Charles Babbage, the esteemed mathematician and inventor of the Difference Engine. In the 1850s and 1860s, Babbage became notorious for his outbursts against street musicians, a fame that resulted in repeated harassment from neighbors in Manchester Square, not to mention the musicians themselves (Winter 71-79). His perpetual quest for silence apparently brought out the worst in his neighbors, who, when he sought policemen to banish the noise, followed him in shouting mobs, sometimes numbering over one hundred, left dead cats on his doorstep, broke his windows, and made threats on his life (262-64). But Babbage’s “near mania” against organ-grinders and the like not only “demonstrate[d], in a heightened form, the mental set of one type of urban reformer” (Winter 72). It advanced class-based arguments against musicians while it also spoke to the more interesting, less-acknowledged identification of the struggling urban intellectual in this period with the ill city dweller. Protests championing the protection of the ill from noises had been already sounded in many newspapers, and Florence Nightingale had even devoted a section of Notes on Nursing (1860) to advocating near-silence for male patients.

Writing four years after Nightingale, Babbage presents the intellectual as an invalid professional, revealing the curious anxieties linking the bed-ridden and the home-ridden. Street music, he claims, “robs the industrious man of his time; it annoys the musical man by its intolerable badness; it irritates the invalid; deprives the patient of that repose which, under such circumstances, is essential for his recovery; and it destroys the time and the energies of all the intellectual classes of society by its continual interruptions of their pursuits” (253). He itemizes various “Instruments of torture” in use on London streets as well as “Encouragers of street music,” who are among “chiefly [. . .] the lower classes of society”: servants, children, pub patrons, “Ladies of doubtful virtue,” and “Occasionally titled ladies” (254). Singling out for defense “those who possess an impaired bodily frame [. . .] [and are awoken] at all hours, in the midst of that temporary repose so necessary for confirmed invalids,” Babbage seeks at the same time to confirm his own legitimacy as a laborer whose
valuable calculations and time have been heedlessly interrupted (255). Babbage self-consciously takes it upon himself to represent and defend a beleaguered minority, those of frail professional status: “I am quite aware that I am fighting the battle of every one of my countrymen who gains his subsistence by his intellectual labour”—as well as those “4.72 persons per cent [who] are constantly ill” (259, 264).

It was, however, Michael Thomas Bass, the political ally of London’s anti-street music inhabitants, who made the high point of his career his pursuit of legal restrictions for the “organ nuisance.” A brewer at Burton, grandson of the founder of Bass Ale, and MP for Derby from 1848 to 1883, Bass succeeded, during his tenure, in endowing a church at Burton and establishing a recreation ground, public swimming pools, a library, and an art gallery in Derby. But the measure that brought Bass greatest fame was his “Act for the Better Regulation of Street Music in the Metropolis,” which he first attempted to bring into Parliament in 1863. His bill proposed to repeal a section of the “Act for further improving the Police in and near the Metropolis” which had required that a householder have “reasonable Cause,” for demanding that police order street musicians to depart his neighborhood (Bass 120). Bass’s Act in its unamended form sought simply to replace this section with a new provision stipulating that the householder could make such a demand without any justification whatsoever, and moreover, that any musician who disobeyed the order could be fined a maximum of forty shillings and taken into custody without a warrant. What Bass put at stake here was a particular type of cultural control critically necessary to those who worked at home: the power for householders to wield their privileges over an expanded urban environment, the ability to domesticate the streets.4

Published to coincide with Parliamentary deliberations over a reconsideration of the bill the following year, Bass’s Street Music in the Metropolis represented the most influential and substantial “organ nuisance” text. The 120-page volume is surprisingly informative and revealing, less a piece of vitriolic propaganda than an anthology of dozens of street music writings culled from letters, official reports, and the press. In his Preface, Bass indicates that a widely expressed need for orderly quiet led him to publish the book: “I have received letters from persons of all classes expressing their gratitude to me for taking up this question, and urging me to persevere. [. . .] Nothing but a careful perusal of their letters could convey the anxiety felt by so many persons for some effectual check to the
daily increasing grievance of organ-grinders and street music” (v-vi). The “anxiety” Bass senses, however, as his Preface goes on to demonstrate, is not that of “all classes” but of middle-class professionals, specifically those who labor in their homes. He notes that members of “all the learned professions,” as well as “the most distinguished literary and scientific men” and even a group of two hundred London composers and performers, have enthusiastically endorsed his stance in their correspondence with him. For the sake of their livelihoods and to protect the ill, the law must be emended. The letters, articles, and other evidence in his book “will enable any Member of the Legislature and the public generally to form a correct opinion of the real state of the existing law, and will demonstrate what great obstacles are opposed by street music to the progress of art, science, and literature; and what torments are inflicted on the studious, the sensitive, and the afflicted” (vii). By collecting into a unified whole the angry voices of practitioners of the arts and sciences, Bass’s book consolidates their power, even as it underscores the anomalies of their working lives.

Letter-writers throughout the book reiterate that street music must above all disturb neither their relaxation nor their occupations. Invoking whatever authority their professional identities can provide, the mounting chorus of their voices also evokes the pathos of their struggling work lives. “I am a clergyman in delicate health,” writes “a sufferer”; “I have difficult law business, literary work, and am besides a musical composer,” claims another; a third writes, “I am an artist [. . .] paying a large amount annually in local rates, and I do think it very hard that I cannot be allowed to pursue my calling in quiet” (qtd. in Bass 10, 18, 32). An academic notes, “I am cruelly interrupted by grind-organs, in the midst of studies which demand the concentration of my whole attention,” while “one engaged in literary pursuits” describes with disdain the “other class [. . .] of household servants, and others, whose wishes cannot surely be of any importance when weighed against those of [. . .] the scientific man, the author, the artist, and others who labour hard for the public benefit” (qtd. in Bass 29, 33-34). And a music teacher writing to Bass essentially speaks for all of the distressed Londoners “who live by their brains”: “Why should a man, who has spent years in acquiring skill in his profession, who pays high rent and heavy taxes, be robbed of his time, while a vagabond, who pays neither one or the other, grinds two or three streets out of as many pence?” (qtd. in Bass 31). The dominant themes of the letters, indeed, the aspects that unite these strug-
gling teachers, students, and writers in a collective identity, are an ardent defense of the home as workplace and an acute contempt for the less-educated and fortunate.

The centerpiece of Bass’s book, however, is a letter from none other than Dickens himself, co-signed by artists and writers who “cannot fail to have the greatest weight and authority” (40):

Your correspondents are, all, professors and practitioners of one or other of the arts or sciences. In their devotion to their pursuits—tending to the peace and comfort of mankind—they are daily interrupted, harassed, worried, wearied, driven nearly mad, by street musicians. They are even made especial objects of persecution by brazen performers on brazen instruments [. . .] for, no sooner does it become known to those producers of horrible sounds that any of your correspondents have particular need of quiet in their own houses, than the said houses are beleaguered by discordant hosts seeking to be bought off. [. . .]

Your grateful correspondents take the liberty to suggest to you that, although a Parliamentary debate undoubtedly requires great delicacy in the handling, their avocations require at least as much, and that it would highly conduce towards the success of your proposed enactment, if you prevail on its opponents to consent to state their objections to it, assailed on all sides by the frightful noises in despite of which your correspondents have to gain their bread. (qtd. in Bass 41–42)

The list of cosignatories reads like a roster of the Victorian cultural elite: Alfred Tennyson, John Everett Millais, Francis Grant, Forster, Leech, William Holman Hunt, Wilkie Collins, Frith, Richard Doyle, Carlyle, Alfred Wigan, Thomas Faed, E. M. Barry, Thomas Woolner, and so on—all told, twenty-eight representative authors, painters, engravers, illustrators, historians, actors, sculptors, musicians, architects, and scientists. Most draw attention to their peculiar professional status by including their home addresses, many of which were significantly their places of work. Evidence suggests concern for Leech’s health might have motivated Dickens to write the letter, if he did not in fact compose it at Leech’s request (Letters 10: 396). But its message is one Dickens makes his own, with an unmistakable rhetorical forcefulness that would seem quite comic were his objections not so earnest.

While hardly on the scale of the vocational manifestos of, say, the Guild of Literature and Art, or later, the Society of Authors, Dickens’s letter nonetheless unites an ad hoc professional collective. Although Kaplan’s description of the signers as a group of “writers” is an oversimplification, his comment that they are “partly distinguished by their inability to sympathize with the inconvenient poor” more accurately points
to the letter’s implicit intention of reinforcing class distinctions (Dickens 478). But the most revealing aspect of the document is its emphasis, following Carlyle’s lead, upon the home as a critical, if problematic, site of identity for these workers, and therefore as a space to be defended at all costs. Alternatively, those “not absolutely tied to London by their avocations,” could relocate to the country in desperation. Such early incidents of “write flight,” so to speak, suggest the beginnings of the more widespread retreat artists were to make to suburban London in the 1870s (Lamb). Dickens’s defense of his territory did not end with the letter. The following April, while completing Our Mutual Friend at Somers Place in Hyde Park, he reiterated the conflicted dynamics of professional accomplishment, the space of home, and street noise: “I am working like a dragon at my book, and am a terror to the household, likewise to all the organs and brass bands in this quarter” (Nonesuch Letters 3: 419). For Dickens, nearing the end of his final completed novel, to write with such fervor was to demand private territory, that is, to terrify—both those inside who occupied the same domestic space and those outside who noisily threatened to invade and stifle his professional endeavors.

Few, though, were more terrified about street music than Leech himself, who embodied the metaphor of homebound artist as invalid, because indeed he was both. He spent his final years stricken with angina, under growing financial pressures, and “confessing with desperation that street noises were killing him and they were ‘driving him to suicide’” (Houfe 196). Appearing more frequently as he neared his death, Leech’s cartoons of organ-grinders revealed the surprisingly vindictive side of an artist usually considered “before all else a lovable man [. . . ] incapable of wounding, incapable of making an enemy, ever glad to do a kindness” (Ley 202). Leech’s cartoons of the organ-grinders appeared in Punch beginning in the 1850s and about twice annually over his final six years. In January 1864, Leech’s confrontation with street musicians was reported by Henry Silver: “J[ohn] L[eech] still nervous about himself, defied by 2 organ men yesterday who called him ‘You bl[ood]y sh[i]t’ ‘You bl[ood]y b[u]g’ etc in the choicest Billingsgate. Said if he hadn’t feared the excitement he would have knocked them down” (qtd. in Houfe 199). In a letter to The Times later that year, Leech called for “some more summary mode [. . .] of indicting” musical “foul-mouthed foreigners” (6). Leech’s persistently xenophobic street music cartoons capitalized, as had Babbage’s pamphlet, on the singularly negative effect of organ-grinding on invalids. While it might seem feasible to explain Leech’s response to street noise
as a case of “shattered nerves,” or nervous breakdown—a malady common enough among Victorians—and leave it at that, his reaction was equally one of professional indignation. Leech’s infamous “Sketch from a Study Window,” published in *Punch* shortly after the introduction of Bass’s Bill, encapsulates this response (fig. 1). As seen from the window of the artist’s studio in his Kensington home, a group of hunched, ragged organ-grinders haunt an otherwise empty street far into the distance, while near the center of the image crawls a large insect. This, Leech suggests, is a louse among lice, a key symbol of the pestilence that, organs in tow, disturbs his labors, corrupts his health, and infests his residential landscape.

As references to street music in contemporary accounts as mere “horrible sounds” imply, the words “music” and “noise” became unstable terms throughout the debates. Bailey has observed that for Victorians “leisure in particular represented an area where social distinctions were vulnerable” (*Leisure* 173). As a result, many professionals who felt threatened by street organs considered it vitally important to maintain the semantic distinction between “music” as intended for those of refined tastes indoors and grinding noise as meant for the exterior masses. “Music, delightful as it is in season, is not desirable every hour from sunrise to midnight; but what torments us is not music, nor anything like music,” a leader in the *Examiner* claimed (qtd. in Bass 46-47). “The organ is an instrument of torture to musical ears,” which, it continued, produces not harmonious melodies but “hackneyed slang music” (47, 53). The author insisted that organ-grinders were not musicians, since their technique solely consisted of “twirling round and round a handle like that of a small coffee-mill” (52). A physician writing to Bass protested “the lawless noise which disgraces London” (qtd. in Bass 15), and a *Punch* parody offered up a “Programme for Quiet Street Musical Performance” including a German band, a “Man with organ,” a “Man, without organ, but with monkey,” a “Combination of talent. Man with organ and monkey,” an “organ with donkey,” “Niggers, accompanied by an admiring crowd,” a “Dancing Pony,” and a “Grand Finale” of street minstrels, organ, and volunteer band playing simultaneously: “Such are the delights of the Great London Unmusical Season!” the author concluded (qtd. in Bass 73-75). The most damning method of attacking street music, these aesthetic arbiters appeared to realize, was to deny its very musicality. “Lawless noise,” “hackneyed slang,” “unmusic”—all such epithets signified attempts to distinguish between an ac-
Fig. 1. John Leech, “Sketch from a Study Window.” *Punch* 45 (1863): 53.
ceptable middle-class form of leisure and its less-refined manifestation on the streets.9

And yet the repertoire in the streets echoed middle-class tastes from the highbrow to the low, including "mostly popular middle-class and operatic songs, dances and marches, hymns, oratorio extracts (especially Handel), and light overtures" (Middleton 79). The instruments themselves produced sounds ranging from dulcet and charming to, in the words of one music historian, "loud and coarse [...] [like that] of a monstrously amplified ice-cream van" (Pearsall 192).10 Although some of the musicians likely were quite accomplished, what they played depended in part on who would listen: as one of the organ-grinders Mayhew interviewed commented, "'You must have some opera tunes for the gentlemen, and some for the poor people, and they like the dancing tune’" (Russell 65; Mayhew 3: 175). From "The Last Rose of Summer" to "Dixieland," from the prison song in Il Trovatore to "Rule Britannia," the music that circulated in the streets represented an unruly mix of the popular, the nationalistic, and the international, geared primarily to the sub-stratum of the very poor, those in Clerkenwell and elsewhere who could not afford to attend even a third-rate music hall (Mackay; Pearsall 194).

In their rearrangement and widespread dispersal of musical works, organ-grinders joined other street performers to form a provocative other, a threatening double to the respectable concert or drawing-room recital. It was in essence a Victorian variation on "rough music," "a latter-day charivari" that asserted populist unruliness against the "new standards of urban discipline" imposed by the moralizing force of the Metropolitan Police (Bailey, "Breaking" 207; Storch 483, 496).

Within this context, the need for Bass’s Act became that much more urgent. Indeed, the publication of his book had its effect: in July 1864 his motion passed through to Royal Assent "without debate," although changes to the Act’s wording partly moderated Bass’s original extremist language (Sponza 178-79).11 Leech captured the victory in a Punch cartoon that, in a sign of anticipation, actually appeared two months before the Assent was given (fig. 2). In the cartoon, above the caption "Three Cheers for Bass and His Barrel of Beer, and Out with the Foreign Ruffian and His Barrel-Organ!" a burly Bass seems about to roll a barrel of his own ale into one of Leech’s typically seedy organ-grinders, presumably to push him off the edge of the coast where he stands, still grinding away. Championing the wealthy brewer Bass, his weapon the weight of his Parliamentary power and, quite literally, his family name
and distinctly British business, Leech rendered the purging of organ-grinders from England as an economic and occupational struggle as well as a nationalistic one. This confrontation set barrel against barrel, the English commercial success against his foreign foil. Yet even as Leech’s poor visual pun disturbingly pointed to the occupational echo between brewing mogul and grinding mongrel, it expressed the anxious need to separate the two.

Propelled by Babbage, Dickens, and others, Bass’s Act sought through lawful means to establish such a distinction between professionals and intrusive outsiders, but only by facilitating professionals’ greater meddling in those outsiders’ affairs. The Act provided those members of the middle classes anxious about the overlap between their homes and working spaces with a legal outlet, an authorized method to control the street musicians who disturbed both. And indeed, as opposed to the rather more civic-minded gestures of Bass, some of the most visible enemies of street music—Carlyle, Dickens, Leech, and their colleagues—were finally less concerned with sanitizing those streets than with the goal of keeping their homes quiet so they could do their work. Yet, if the ugly contempt of their response cannot be denied, then the tendency to judge these workers too harshly should also per-
haps be resisted. Over a century later, with the oddly retrograde phenomenon of telecommuting in ascent, the territorial problems that plagued these home-workers have renewed immediacy, while against the newer auditory challenges of accelerated technology—the beeps of cell phones, the blare of car alarms, and the buzz of superhighways—battles continue for spaces to concentrate and to write.

III

"Please remember the organ, sir,"

What? hasn’t he left me yet?

I promise, good man; for its tedious burr

I never can forget.

—Lewis Carroll, "Those Horrid Hurdy-Gurdies!" (903)

The passage of the Street Music Act, the best effort of Bass, Babbage, Dickens, and the others, did little immediately to displace street musicians. Hardly a friend to organ-grinders, James Greenwood spoke for many when he wrote in 1867 that “there is no cure for the evil; organ-grinding has become a settled institution of the country, and as such must be endured” (226). The inimitable author of Music and Morals, H. R. Haweis, claimed that “the organ is a great fact, and perhaps, in a survey of street music in England, the most prominent fact” (458). He went on to balance prevailing negative stereotypes of the grinders with a belated, romanticized reconsideration:

I bless that organ-man—a very Orpheus in hell! I stand in the foul street where the blessed sun shines, and where the music is playing; I give the man a penny to prolong the happiness of those poor people, of those hungry, pale, and ragged children; and, as I retire, I am saluted as a public benefactor, and was ever pleasure bought so cheap and pure? (461)

A similarly positive portrait was provided by Adolph Smith, who found Italian street musicians “irresistible” and “fascinating,” saluting them as those who had “nurtured in our courts and alleys echoes of purer music than could otherwise have reached these dismal abodes” (121, 125). Richard Rowe concurred, writing that the organ-grinders' "faces sometimes shed poetry on our prosaic thoroughfares" (274). Alongside this recasting of the organists as quaint objects of contemplation, complaints to The Times persisted, but with not nearly the force and focus of the period of the 1850s and early 1860s, partly because of the middle-
class exodus to the suburbs that occurred throughout the closing decades of the century (Sponza 181). This suggests that the anti-street music movement was not only unsuccessful in banishing organists and their grinding, but perhaps even ultimately provoked a backlash of romantic nostalgia that undermined the Act's effectiveness. With the passage of time, such nostalgia only deepened, as the remaining itinerant musicians became quaint curiosities, exotic reminders of the life that once animated metropolitan streets.

Toward the end of the century, mid-Victorian aggressive attacks upon the intractable street music problem came to be regarded with a mingling of empathy and satire. Not long before embarking on his career as dramatist, George Bernard Shaw, considered England's first great modern music critic, wrote in one of his columns for the Morning Leader that the street musicians of his youth had all but disappeared: "I have been asked for my views on the barrel-organ question. I reply there is no barrel-organ question. [. . .] There are hundreds of thousands of children in London today who have never heard a barrel-organ. That is a tremendous fact" (3: 43). Shaw reminisced fondly over his sightings of organists as a child, but regretted that these had given way to street-piano-players. He went on to propose fanciful legal action that mocked the Street Music Act:

Let a short Act of Parliament be passed, placing all street musicians outside the protection of the law; so that any citizen may assail them with stones, sticks, knives, pistols, or bombs without incurring any penalties—except, of course, in the case of the instrument itself being injured; for Heaven forbid that I should advocate any disregard for the sacredness of property, especially in the form of industrial capital! (3: 47)

Though he could readily do without the musicians' miserable dissonance, his ludicrously draconian measure only highlighted the impracticality of the then-current and ineffective law, Bass's Act itself. Shaw reflected on his predecessors' attempts to legislate city streets with mixed feelings, sympathetic toward the desire for silence in which to think and work, but—this was the central shift—with a certain wistfulness for what had once been considered a nuisance, and a resignation to the inevitability of such noise, one of the facts of life, after all, for writers in urban modernity.

By the fin-de-siècle, the London professionals who worked out of their homes thought the noise of street music less an enemy to their labors than a resonant symbol, one of a piece with the sense of ennui.
and alienation that suffused the new era. Once repellent, street music now attracted those who might hear in its strains the sound of their own struggles or those of their age. In Germany, Theodor Lessing could claim that city noises both caused and revealed the degeneration and “cultural immaturity” of modern European urban life (Baron 165, 173). Yet at nearly the same time, in “The Barrel-Organ” (1897), Arthur Symons was mourning a frustrated romance by aligning his emotional state with that former target of Victorian scorn:

Inarticulate voice of my heart,  
Rusty, a worn-out thing,  
Harsh with a broken string,  
Mended, and pulled apart,  
All the old tunes played through,  
Fretted by hands that have played,  
Tremulous voice that cries out to me out of the shade,  
The voice of my heart is crying in you. (44)

Several years later, describing the noise of pre-war London, T. S. Eliot noted “many babies, pianos, street pianos, accordions, singers, hummers, whistlers,” yet concluded: “I find it quite possible to work in this atmosphere. The noises of a city so large as London don’t distract one much; they become attached to the city and depersonalize themselves” (Letters 55). Where it formerly had been singled out as an especial nuisance, street music became an impersonal fragment of the aural tapestry of Modernist London, and a vanishing reminder of the past:

I keep my countenance,  
I remain self-possessed  
Except when a street piano, mechanical and tired  
Reiterates some worn-out common song  
With the smell of hyacinths across the garden  
Recalling things that other people have desired.  
(“Portrait of a Lady” 10–11)

Artists and writers in vocations once opposed to and imperiled by street music ultimately appropriated and aestheticized it as a voice and symbol. So empowered, it offered new avenues for representation but also posed a new kind of threat, in the escapist sentiments of fatigued longing and disabling nostalgia it unexpectedly echoed and provoked. For
Eliot and many of his contemporaries, city noise no longer worked against art, as Victorians had perceived it, but, ironically, within it.

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NOTES

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1For approaches that are complementary to Corbin's and Attali's claims, see Wilson, who studies "chapbooks, plague pamphlets, street cries, and ballads" as well as "the economic rhythms of voice and sound" in the "soundscapes" of Tudor and Stuart London (8–9). See also Smith, The Acoustic World, which offers "an ecology of voice, media, and community" for the primarily oral culture of early modern England (29).

2Lucio Sponza offers the most detailed study of Italian immigrants in Victorian London. For a recent survey that focuses primarily upon the twentieth century, see Colpi. The literature on English views toward foreigners and immigrants during the period is, of course, vast; a very selective group of recent studies includes Cohen, especially ch. 1, 5–36; Holmes; Panayi.

3While Victorian leisure is conventionally considered a public phenomenon it had its more intimate manifestations inside homes as Bailey and others have argued. The artistic and intellectual classes who played and worked at home further complicate our understanding of the spatial situation of leisure. Indeed, it is partly this group's lack of such separation that led them to suffer increasing anxiety about urban disturbances. For they considered street music an affront to their status as both homeowners and at-home workers, or to use Baune's term, as individuals with overlapping "occupations."

4A detailed summary of the fate of the bill, which initially failed, is given in Sponza 176–81; the full text of Bass's proposed bill appears in Bass 120, and the amended bill as passed in Sponza 341.

5Other reprintings of the letter (Dickens, Letters 10: 388–89 and Ruff 36, for example) unfortunately omit the cosignatories' names and addresses.

6Bruce Haley's Healthy Body demonstrates the pervasiveness of illness in the Victorian period and the resulting cultural emphasis on the healthy body as indicator of moral and mental fortitude (5–6). Following Haley's work, a great deal has of course appeared on the subject, especially feminist approaches that help to compensate for his single-minded focus on the Victorian male. For others who have dealt with neurosis in the culture and in cultural productions, see Drinka; Oppenheim.

7An apocryphal incident that has acquired some of the same notoriety as Leech's confrontations is Anthony Trollope's November 1882 apparent altercation with an organ-grinder or German bandsman playing outside his window, which supposedly agitated the author so much that it led to his fatal stroke several hours later (Hall 513–14).
Bailey discusses leisure as a “play discipline to complement the work discipline that was the principal means of social control in an industrial capitalist society” (Leisure 5). Clearly, the Bass Act was a form of “play discipline” and “social control,” though not one enacted with the intention of morally uplifting the working classes. Bailey emphasizes urban leisure as distinct from work in time and place of practice, while the subject of my argument is the anxiety that results when the two intermingle—when London street organs grind into the workplace that itself overlaps with the home.

While many scholars have noted the sensory elements of social reformers’ growing fascination with urban others, few discuss the particularly complex problem of hearing. For example, Stallybrass and White describe the “transformation of the senses” that Victorian policing enacted, arguing that an “increased regulation of touch” (135) arose between lower and middle classes during the period, as well as a new emphasis on the visual and olfactory senses (as in “The Great Stink” of 1858). Since changing conditions of hearing and problems of urban sound would seem to be very much in line with their argument, it is surprising that they do not discuss them. See their chapter, “The City: The Sewer, the Gaze, and the Contaminating Touch,” 125–48.

For those who want to gauge the accuracy of the responses for themselves, performances of restored barrel organs, organettes, and a barrel piano are included on the recording Music of the Streets.

The amendments attempted to clarify what constituted a “reasonable Cause” for asking musicians to depart. The original 1839 provision had specified illness or other “reasonable Cause”; Bass’s proposal did not require any reason at all; and his amended Act struck a balance, specifying illness “or on account of the Interruption of the ordinary Occupations or Pursuits of any Inmate of such House, or for other reasonable or sufficient Cause” (Sponza 341).

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