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**When The News Was Sung:  
Ballads as News Media in Early Modern Europe  
Una McIlvenna**

In a fictional account of the annual Frankfurt market-fair from 1596, a Brillenkrämer, or seller of reading-glasses, contemplates a change of profession:

I ought to change my line:  
I'm going to buy in more news-sheets,  
since there's such demand for them now.  
I can compose them myself on occasion.  
It doesn't matter much whether the story's true.  
The world wants to be deceived,  
they buy lies for good money.  
The more outrageous the lie, the better the sales,  
as all singers know very well.<sup>1</sup>

In this short diatribe the seller reveals several important aspects of news songs in the early modern period. First, they were extremely popular, enough that the Brillenkrämer wants to take up their production as his new source of income. Second, they could be composed by a range of people: although he is no specialist the Brillenkrämer claims he can 'on occasion' compose them himself; presumably the rest of the time the news songs would be composed by others. Third, they were unreliable, but this was of little concern to their consumers. Lastly, they were sensationalist, because that was their biggest selling point. What is taken for granted, however, is that the news was sung. In early modern Europe, where literacy rates were still at low levels, song was the most effective medium of information dissemination and circulation. In most European countries news songs were set to familiar tunes, which allowed anyone with access to the text to sing it immediately. Melody, rhyme and metre aided memorisation, and meant that the song could be quickly and easily passed on to those without access to literacy or access even to the news-sheet itself.

But news songs differ in crucial ways to the other news media of the early modern period like newsletters, newspapers, or diplomatic correspondence – they differ even from the prose broadsheets and pamphlets that they so closely resemble. As historians of news we need to ask different kinds of questions of these multi-media artifacts. For example, how does the presentation in a performative genre affect the dissemination and reception of information about events? What part do orality and aural play in how the news was sold and received? Here the activities and social status of street singers play an important role. We must consider the production, format and distribution of these songs in order to understand their impact. We also need to pay attention to the conjunction between text and melody,

and the ways in which this affected the presentation of a news event. On a broader scale, what kind of information can ballads provide about specific news events that other documents cannot or will not provide? Can they offer us a new medium by which to interpret historical events? And lastly, how should historians deal with these profoundly emotive texts? The combination of sensationalist language and affecting music meant that songs had the potential to provoke a more powerful response than any other contemporary news source, and this emotional potency can at times be challenging for a modern historian to decipher and explain. This article will attempt to answer some of these questions and suggest some of the skills we as historians need to develop in order to appreciate the full meaning of songs as the most popular of news media in early modern Europe.

### Composition

So how were news songs created? What were the links between the event and the dissemination of news about it? Most news songs were, like the majority of cheap print, anonymously authored. This could be at times because of their political or controversial content. In the religiously divided city of Augsburg, the expulsion in June 1584 of the Protestant preacher Georg Müller caused a great deal of social unrest. The Catholic city authorities attempted to clamp down on any forms of subversive material, in particular the many songs that were composed in protest of the expulsion by the city's residents. The trial records, studied by Alexander Fisher, reveal a great deal about how news songs were composed. In his interrogation, Abraham Schädlin, a weaver from Augsburg, confessed that

he fled to Ulm on account of a song he wrote concerning Doctor Müller. But he did not distribute it. Rather, he wished to dedicate it to Daniel Weiss's wife, but another named Georg Braun found it on [Schädlin's] person and asked him if he could have it so he could show it to his wife. Then Braun copied it and distributed it, so that everyone knew that [Schädlin] had [written] it. [...] He did indeed make this song and showed it to others, but he only found out later that he had done wrong.<sup>2</sup>

We can glean a great deal from Schädlin's testimony about the production and dissemination of political songs: an ordinary tradesman could compose one, and it would be copied and distributed by others. Although Schädlin did not claim to have had the song printed, it exists in multiple printed copies. The song, *Wo es Gott nit mit Augspurg helt*, was a contrafact, or a re-wording, of a well known Lutheran psalm tune *Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält*, an already controversial Protestant song, so Schädlin's claims that he was unaware 'he had done wrong' were clearly disingenuous.

Around the same time another weaver, Jonas Losch, also confessed to having been partly responsible for composing a different song about Georg Müller.<sup>3</sup> He claimed that

Last Sunday an apprentice from Memmingen named Michael Karg came to him and brought him a printed song, which he copied, writing at the top, 'I, Jonas Losch, made this song'. But he did nothing more than add a little bit to it, and change a few stanzas; in particular he wrote the entire last stanza himself. He does not know where Karg went thereafter; he thinks he went to Ulm. There is a preacher in Ulm named Herr Peter who also wrote a song about the uprising, which he had heard sung there.<sup>4</sup>

Losch's testimony reveals that it was possible for the consumer of a printed song to amend it, and produce a new version. It also reveals that preachers were active in the composition of such songs.

This kind of production, circulation, and censorship of politically controversial songs is also evident in France where songs attacking Louis XV and his ministers and mistresses were so numerous that they filled whole songbooks such as the *Chansonnier Maurepas*.<sup>5</sup> Transcripts of the interrogations of those found with such songs reveal a similarly active community of writers circulating and improving upon each others' creative work. The interrogation of Jean Le Mercier in July 1749 revealed

that last winter the deponent, who was in the seminary of St. Nicolas du Chardonnet, heard one day the sieur Th  ret, who was then also in the same seminary, reciting couplets from a song against the court starting with these words, 'That a bastard strumpet'; that the deponent asked for the song from Th  ret, who gave it to him and to which the deponent made a few notes, and had even marked on the copy he wrote on and gave to the sieur Guyard ... Added the deponent that on the same sheet ... there were two pieces of verses on the subject of the Pretender, ... which two pieces the deponent copied and destroyed in the same time without having distributed them to anyone.<sup>6</sup>

Notably, here we see multiple songs on the same sheet, another common feature which will be discussed later. In this instance we have educated seminarians composing pornographic and libelous songs and circulating them, but the German examples show that song writing was an activity open to people of all social statuses and education levels, and had been for two centuries. Adam Fox has shown how in Jacobean England libelous songs were regularly composed even by those with no or little literacy.<sup>7</sup> News songs were often composed by those who sold them: in W  rttemberg in 1648, a colporteur called Buchh  nslein made a copper etching of a reported vision of an angel, composed a song, and then distributed the broadside from inn to inn.<sup>8</sup> And in Italy, the street singer Bighignol composed, printed and disseminated a song on the naval battle between the Ferrarese and the Venetians in December 1509 within two weeks of the event.<sup>9</sup> A

minority of ballad writers could have been considered professional, and were known for their work. The variety of the repertoire of the early seventeenth-century English balladeer Martin Parker was celebrated by Henry Peacham in a 1641 pamphlet: 'For a peny you may have all the Newes in England, of Murders, Flouds, Witches, Fires, Tempests, and what not, in one of Martin Parkers Ballads'.<sup>10</sup> So ballad composition was open to those of all social classes and cultural backgrounds, and could be both a casual pastime or a steady source of income, making it difficult to make any kind of claim of a 'typical' news song writer. There were, however, characteristic features of news songs that all writers would have borne in mind: melody and format.

### **Contrafactum**

The social impact of news songs lay not only in the texts, but also in the tunes to which they were set. The process of contrafactum, putting new words to well-known songs, was a feature of most ballads in the early modern period. Certain tunes were chosen deliberately for the cultural and emotional associations that they carried with them from their earlier versions, and so the choice of tune had important consequences for the overall meaning of the new song.<sup>11</sup> This is why Jonas Losch's interrogators were so keen to ascertain exactly which melody he had chosen to set his song to. Losch originally claimed 'Since the song had no melody [indicated], he copied it in such a way that it could be sung to the tune of *Ich stund an einem Morgen, heimlich an einem Ort.*' The interrogators were not convinced, however, and continued to question him:

Since this song has a different melody than the one he recently stated, did he not make the entire song himself?

Losch: He meant that he had indicated the tune *Ich stund an einem Morgen* at the beginning, and added to this: 'as well as *Lobt Gott, ihr frommen Christen*'.<sup>12</sup>

This admission is important: *Lobt Gott, ihr frommen Christen*, unlike the benign *Ich stund an einem Morgen*, was a propagandistic song decrying Catholic opposition to Luther's teachings. The choice of tune, then, added to the already controversial text, attacking Catholics both in word and melody.<sup>13</sup> Not only Protestants were skilled at this kind of provocative tune choice; songs about the besieged Protestant towns during the French Wars of Religion were composed by Catholics in the voices of the wives of Protestant leaders, who sang of their regret at their husbands' heresy. These were set to the tune of *Dames d'honneur je vous prie à mains jointes*, a tune regularly used for the traditional laments of noble women at the deaths of their lords. Linking the tune choice with a specific depiction of gender roles, Kate van Orden notes that 'poets, printers, and pamphleteers mobilized the voices of women to articulate moral and religious stances that ... were right in line with the goals of a Catholic monarchy.'<sup>14</sup>

### **Format**

News songs could be written by diverse composers and set to meaningful tunes; they could also be printed in a range of formats that had consequences for how they might be sold, consumed and kept. In Italy, they were printed in octavo-style format, often featuring an illustration on the title page. In England, ballads were more likely to be sold in broadside format, with one song and often an illustration of the news event. Broadside allowed the consumer to paste the song onto the wall, and there is ample evidence in England for the practice of pasting broadside ballads to the walls of homes and alehouses. In Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, Cokes exclaims to Mrs Overdo, 'O sister, do you remember the ballads over the nursery-chimney at home o' my own pasting up!'.<sup>15</sup> Similarly, Isaac Walton revealed that 'I can't, for my Heart, leave a Room before I have thoroughly studied the Walls of it, and examined the several printed Papers which are usually pasted upon them' and continued with a discussion of a ballad he had seen.<sup>16</sup> The use of ballads as wallpaper was not only for aesthetic reasons, it also encouraged their repeated use: a character in the play *The Triumphant Widow* remarks to his sister, 'Oh, Cicely, here's the brave Ballet you and I use to sing, I know it by the Picture.'<sup>17</sup> German ballads could also take the broadside format, although they could also be found in the octavo-style, sometimes with another song or two advertised on the title page. French news songs, however, could be found in a variety of formats; the 1705 song on the execution of Pierre Antoine Hugues was a single-sheet with the text printed both recto and verso, which would prevent its use as wallpaper.

Many early modern French songs are, however, more likely to be found in *recueils*, cheap songbooks that often contained a multitude of songs on a surprisingly broad range of topics.<sup>18</sup> These *recueils* tend to have titles that hint at the range of songs they contain: the 1580 Lyon songbook *The Rosary of new songs. As much about love as about war, containing mostly the happy victories obtained in Auvergne and elsewhere*<sup>19</sup> indicates that it would be suitable for Catholic royalist supporters to purchase, while the 1579 songbook *Summary of all the collections of songs, as much amorous, rustic as musical*<sup>20</sup> gives no indication that it contains some virulently anti-Huguenot songs. Such diversity within these songbooks raises questions about how they were sold and used. How did street singers choose which songs to perform in order to sell them? Were the titles deliberately ambiguous so as to hide the political and potentially controversial songs inside? We must pay attention to the format in which news songs were printed; as we shall see, it could have profound consequences not only for the dissemination of news but also for its interpretation.

### **Dissemination of news songs**

So what was it like to hear a news song? Where did one do this? Louis Sébastien Mercier recounts how songs about executed criminals were performed in late eighteenth-century Paris:

There are still complaints about hanged men and those broken on the wheel, that the people listen to with tears in their eyes and that they rush to

buy. When, to the delight of the poet of the Pont Neuf, some illustrious figure mounts the scaffold, his death is put into rhyme and sung to the accompaniment of a violin. In this way everything in Paris is the subject of song; and no matter whether one is a Maréchal of France or a hanged man, if you're not put into song you will be unknown to the people. I put it to you that in the streets of the capital [the convicted murderer] Desrues is better known than Voltaire.<sup>21</sup>

So Mercier's account tells us that news songs were performed on the Pont Neuf, often with musical accompaniment, and people would listen and be visibly moved on the hearing. They would then buy the song, and – importantly – this was a primary source of information about these events for them ('if you're not put into song you will be unknown to the people'). Unsurprisingly, ballad-singers often chose densely populated areas like crowded bridges, fairs and markets to advertise their wares. Sarah Batchelor, the guilty party in a theft in London in 1740, was identified because the witness claimed of her, 'I knew her no otherways, than by singing Ballads about the Market.'<sup>22</sup> The Venetian Council of Ten recognised the popularity of such areas in a 1543 injunction stating that every new text had to be subjected to pre-publication censorship which was directed at those 'who sell such books and works, prognostications, stories and songs, letters and other similar things on the Rialto bridge, and in other places of this city.'<sup>23</sup> The move towards censorship reflected the potential for dangerous subversion that street-singers presented by singing these songs in the most public of places.

The socially marginal status of singers also meant that they were often linked with criminality. This link was so strong in the minds of the English that the mere mention in Old Bailey trials that a witness was a ballad-singer was enough to entirely discredit their testimony. Thus, while deponents in English trials regularly deny their involvement in ballad-singing as a profession, there are nevertheless multiple occasions when it is clear that this is their trade: in the criminal cases at the Old Bailey we regularly bump into characters such as 'Singing Jenny' or 'Ballad-singing Jack'.<sup>24</sup> By contrast, the German Bänkelsangers and Italian cantastorie, while itinerant and often living a somewhat precarious existence, often travelled with large oil paintings of various news events and stories that they could point to while singing.<sup>25</sup> To travel, sometimes vast distances, around the country with what were effectively props argues for a strong identification with the profession of ballad-singing, rather than a casual hobby. But news-singers could rarely escape the wary eyes of the authorities, who associated their profession with vagrancy and begging. In 1580, Wilhelm V, duke of Bavaria, commanded town councils to ban 'useless German singing' (*tenschen unnützen Gesang*) in front of homes by 'wandering, masterless boys and trouble-makers' (*umlaufende Herrnlose Buben, und Stürzer*).<sup>26</sup>

And it wasn't only the authorities who perceived news singers to be disreputable. In 1670 the writer Hans Jakob von Grimmelshausen placed street singers in a

contemptuous list of dubious occupations that one might find in the marketplace: ‘all sorts of vagabonds... such as puppeteers, rope-dancers, conjurers, news-singers, glue-boilers, knife-grinders, plumbers, lady harpists, master-beggars, tricksters and all the rest of the honourable riff-raff.’<sup>27</sup> The notorious reputation of street singers was even memorialised in a ballad, *A Caveat for Cutpurses*, which warned the audience for street songs that they were being distracted while their purses were being robbed:

But now to my hearers this Counsel I give,  
And pray friends remember it as long as you live,  
Bring out no more cash in purse pocket or wallet,  
Then one single penny to pay for the Ballet,  
For Cut-purse doth shrowd  
Himself in a Cloud,  
theres many a purse hath been lost in a crowd  
For hes the most rogue that doth crowd up & curses  
Who first cryes my Masters beware of your purses.<sup>28</sup>

Why then, given the disreputable status of news ballads and their vendors, would anyone listen to one, or even more significantly, buy one? Although the sale of news songs was often carried out by a group of sellers associated with duplicitousness and criminality it does not follow that the songs themselves were any less reliable as a source of news. Songs about the punishment of German criminals were often based closely on the *Urgicht*, the official confession, that was read in public.<sup>29</sup> But their popular – as opposed to official – status meant that songs could be a source of information that the authorities preferred not to divulge.

### **Ballads as a source of unofficial news**

Pierre Craon (or Créon), better known as Nez d’argent, was a Huguenot preacher from Dijon who in 1561 was involved in the Saint-Médard riot in Paris, where Huguenots, provoked by the sound of church bells being rung by the Catholic church of Saint-Médard trying to drown out the sounds of their service, went over to the church where they began to riot and commit acts of iconoclasm.<sup>30</sup> For his part in the riot Nez d’argent was hanged, and would have had his remains burned, except that spectators interrupted the ritual to enact their own vengeance, dragging his corpse to the dungheap and mutilating it. It would appear that the spectators felt that burning was not shameful enough for a heretic, but the end result was that the authorities seemed to lose control of the execution ritual. The song about this ritual gone wrong is set to the tune ‘la fille portant panier’ which is lost, but the rapid rhythm and metre of the verse, particularly the use of predominantly monosyllabic vocabulary, indicates that this is most likely to have been a lively tune, with four lines of six syllables followed by an emphatic eight-syllable rhyming couplet:



Quand ils l'eurent jetté  
Du haut de la potence,  
Tous ces petits enfans  
Se sont remis ensemble,  
A la voirie l'ont trainé,  
L'avoit il pas bien merité?

Ils ont prins leur chemin  
Par la ferronnerie,  
Lié et garrotté  
Menans joyeuse vie,  
Crians, chantans joyusement  
Voicy venir le nez d'argent.

Quand ils l'eurent trainé  
Dedans son cymetiere,  
Par dedans le ruisseau  
Qui luy servoit de biere,  
Lors ses tripailles vont tirer  
Pour dedans un feu les jetter

Quand ils l'eurent trainé  
Ou estoit son sepulchre,  
Bien tost luy ont osté  
Les tripes & la fressure,  
Puis de son coeur un chien l'a avallé,  
Voila allé, voila allé.

Once they had thrown him  
From the height of the scaffold,  
All these little children  
Got together  
Dragged him to the dungheap  
Didn't he deserve it?

They took the route  
By the ironworks  
Tied and garrotted  
Having a great time,  
Yelling, singing joyously  
Here comes the Nez d'argent.

When they had dragged him  
Into his cemetery,  
Along the stream  
That served him as a bier.  
Then pulled out his innards  
To throw them in a fire.

When they had dragged him  
To where his sepulchre was,  
Soon they had removed  
His guts and organs,  
Then a dog swallowed his heart,  
There you go, there you go.<sup>31</sup>

The breakdown in social order that allowed Nez d'argent to be mutilated is an event the authorities would have preferred to cover up. Instead the people's unofficial participation was put into song, allowing knowledge of the events to be repeated ad infinitum.

### **Audience participation**

The tune to which the Nez d'argent song was set was likely to have been a nursery rhyme, like another mocking song in the same *recueil* about a Huguenot whose executed corpse was similarly mutilated, the lieutenant of Pontoise.<sup>32</sup> Such a choice of tune not only reminded the singers of the children's participation in the mutilation, but also encouraged them to join in a simple, child-like song. A unique characteristic of news songs was their ability to promote audience participation. Some song types, especially those with a refrain, allowed the listeners to join in, and this active, physical participation helped to encourage shared views on the information being disseminated. This can be seen in the Italian barzellette song-

type, in which the *ritornello*, or refrain, is provided by the singer at the start of the song and repeated at the end of each verse. Barzellette were irreverent songs (the word translates as ‘jest’) and so were used to mock their subjects, either in satirical songs attacking political enemies or in the execution songs of despised figures like Jews, Moors, or heinous criminals. Barzellette were also used to recount political events, especially those that celebrated one’s victories over a hated enemy. The *New Barzelletta of the Liberation of Bologna* expressed its joy at the victory of Gaston de Foix in Bologna in February 1512 during the War of the League of Cambrai by opening with the refrain:

Son Bologna liberata	I am Bologna freed
dal furor de quelli hispani	From the terror of those Spanish
qual credean cù lor mani	Who believed, with their hands
pur dhauermi sachegiata	They would have sacked me
Son Bologna liberata	I am Bologna freed
dal furor de quelli hispani <sup>33</sup>	From the terror of those Spanish

The potentially controversial nature of these songs can be seen in the arrest of the printer and street singer Niccolò Zoppino in March 1510 for performing and selling a barzelletta against the Venetian State in the piazza of Ferrara.<sup>34</sup> Songs with a built-in structure for audience participation seem especially suited to the mockery of their subjects, and when that subject was the governing authority the risk of prosecution was particularly high.

### **News songs and moral contemplation**

While the desire for information about news events fuelled the rise of official newspapers, the driving force of pamphlet culture in early modern Europe was financial, and so pamphlets and broadsides often reported on the more sensational stories that would today be considered as ‘tabloid fodder’: violent crimes and their equally gory punishments; disasters both natural and human-caused; stories of multiple births or birth deformities; and miracles, especially those witnessed by many hundreds or even thousands of people. What differentiated pamphlets in song form from their prose counterparts was the ways in which these news items could be presented as an activity that promoted active contemplation of the news through performance and repetition. A good example of this is the news-sheet that reported the miraculous shower of money in Ochsenfurt in 1654:

*A new report, of what happened in Franconia on 14 March between 8 and 9 o’clock in the Marketplace of Ochsenfurt in broad daylight, as is well known silver and imperial coins fell from the air: a true report to be revealed to the Christian reader in a song.*<sup>35</sup>

The final part of the title, that the report is ‘to be revealed to the Christian reader in a song’, is crucial to the recounting of the events in this format. It is through song that the message of the miracle can be learned, memorised and repeated to

others – made known to non-readers of the news-sheet – in a way that is less likely with a prose account. It was imperative that news of miracles and religious beliefs were shared. In seventeenth-century Seville the conflict over the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception led to songs, or *coplas*, being printed and displayed ‘on a board or card in a public place where all might read and learn them’.<sup>36</sup> There was an active attempt made to use songs as teaching opportunities, given the didactic potential they contained. The same *coplas* were printed with an instruction manual, which provided the melody and stated that the songs had to be taught to children in school for two or three weeks so that they could then sing them ‘at home and in the street at all hours, day and night’.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, the news of the nefarious activities of the local bailiff and rent-collector in Makerfield, Lancashire in 1619 was made known by the tenants in a song, and the authors were prepared ‘to reade and singe the said libell as a ballate with a lowde voyce so that all the rest of the companie might heare it’ and also ‘taught their children and boyes to singe the same in the streets in scoffinge manner’.<sup>38</sup> Active learning and use of news songs was viewed as central to their purpose.

Moreover, German news songs were often printed along with other songs on the same sheet and the song about the shower of money was no exception: following directly after the text of the first song was *A fine little penitential song / conveyed in print and placed before the eyes of all people for encouragement of good behaviour and living*.<sup>39</sup> Given the placement of this penitential song, the audience for the news-sheet is encouraged to view and sing the two songs together and thereby take the news event, the miracle of money raining from the sky, as a moment for contemplation of one’s life and an encouragement to repent. But did the audience for these kinds of highly moralistic songs use them in the way they were intended? The vintner and self-styled prophet Hans Keil in seventeenth-century Württemberg collected and used broadsides and songs about all kinds of wonders and apparitions. Several broadsides were found in his home: on his bedroom door there were two, one about a sign of blood in Bohemia and another about a bleeding loaf of bread in Kempten. There was another song about war being the consequence for not doing penance. When Keil was asked why he had so many broadsheets and songs, he responded that he could mirror himself in them and prevent himself from sinning.<sup>40</sup>

Songs could also be combined in what might be considered a type of ‘early modern news medley’: songs on a theme that encouraged their listeners to see separate news events as linked. Guillaume du Bartas’ *The Canticle on the victory at Ivry, obtained by the King* celebrated Henri IV’s recent victory over the forces of the Catholic League in March 1590 that paved the way for his subsequent siege of Paris.<sup>41</sup> We know it was composed immediately upon news of the victory, as du Bartas died only weeks later.<sup>42</sup> It would be re-published in 1594, however, presumably to celebrate Henri IV’s coronation, by Jean Tholosan in Lyon. Tholosan included with the song pamphlet another song in celebration of one of Henri’s earlier

victories, his defeat of the Duke of Joyeuse at the battle of Coutras in October 1587. Coutras was a major news event of the Wars of Religion, a violent response by Huguenots to the revocation of the edicts that had protected them. In his song about Ivry, du Bartas evoked the memory of that previous victory:

ie ne veux pas que l'Isle  
Se rempourpre en mes vers, que la plaine fertile  
De Coutras se r'engraisse: & qu'icy de rechef  
Ton glaive aille tranchant de tes haineux le chef.

I do not wish that the island  
Once again runs red in my verses; I wish that the fertile plain  
Of Coutras once again enriches, and that from now on  
Your sword will slice through the chiefest of your enemies.

By combining the two songs in praise of the new king's earlier victories the publisher contributed to the image of Henri IV as a glorious martial leader, one who had a string of important triumphs over those who questioned his right to rule. Both songs are written in alexandrines, the twelve-syllable metre employed in French for encomiastic praise of leaders, linking the two songs stylistically as well as by topic.

One might argue that the reprinting of the songs in 1594, years after the events had taken place, changes them from 'news' to 'propaganda', but the line between these two categorisations is always blurred when considering song. The entertainment value that songs provided meant that they were suitable material to be reprinted and sung long after the events they depicted had taken place. The assassination of Duke Galeazzo Maria Sforza in Milan in December 1476 was related in a song by Lorenzo dala Rota, the *Lament of the duke Galeazzo Maria, duke of Milan*. The song was reprinted many times, in 1505, 1511, 1515, 1525, 1549, 1552, 1568, 1583, and 1585, not to mention the multiple editions printed in the seventeenth century. Clearly this is a news song that had long since passed from 'news' into the realm of legend, most probably because of its appealing melody and poignant text. Early modern news songs often challenge received notions of what 'news' is, i.e. that the events one is hearing about happened in the recent past or that this is the first time one is hearing about them. Songs often offered commentary on known events, more editorial than reportage. Furthermore, the ways in which song traveled more easily than a mere written text argue for its accessibility in rural areas, away from the urban centres of news, that may not have been up to date with current events.

Such reprinting of a news song is inherently linked to the unique emotive power that songs possessed, which could do more than simply inform the people of news events – songs could move them to action. The events of the French Revolution

were the catalyst for thousands of *contrafacta*, many describing their disgust at the bloodthirstiness they witnessed, many calling for more. One of the most gruesome episodes of the Terror has become known as the Drownings at Nantes, a series of mass executions overseen by Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the Committee for Public Safety's representative to Nantes. Between November 1793 and February 1794, Carrier ordered the mass executions of between 2-5,000 men, women and children, by drowning them from specially designed boats floating in the Loire. Finally exposed for his barbarism, Carrier was executed by guillotine on 16 December 1794. The song about his punishment could therefore be categorised as an execution ballad, but it does not simply detail Carrier's crimes and punishment. Neither does it issue, in the manner of most other execution ballads, a warning to its listener-singers to learn from his example so as to avoid the same fate. Although the first stanza alludes to Carrier's gruesome crimes, the lyrics change from then on, as if to cast one's eyes towards events after his execution:

<p>Mais quand du sénat, la justice          Frappe ce tyran détesté,          Doit-on différer le supplice          Des tyrans qui l'ont imité?</p>	<p>But when, by the hand of the senate,          Justice strikes this detested tyrant,          Should one alter the punishment          Of those tyrants who imitated him?<sup>43</sup></p>
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The song asks what will happen to the other Jacobins who were responsible for similar atrocities. One by one, the remaining architects of the Terror are enumerated and a polemical call for their bloody execution is demanded. The violent demands of the song are reinforced by the choice of tune: the song is set to the air 'Allons enfans de la Patrie', now the national anthem of France. Although it is now thought of as the ultimate in Revolutionary anthems, the song began as a tune for the opposite side: originally intended for royalist soldiers to sing, the song's somewhat vague references to the enemy allowed it to be adopted by the radical fédérés in Marseille.<sup>44</sup> The 'Marseillaise Hymn' was used as musical basis for scores of other songs, but its inextricable links with the watershed events of the Revolution meant that its melody continued to carry a message of the violent overthrow of powerful, menacing tyrants into any of its new versions. This verse, for example, calls for the blood of Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, responsible for the executions of 2,000 people in Lyon in November 1793:

<p>Du fer, du feu, quel assemblage          Frappe sans choix les Lyonnais,          Collot punit par ce carnage,          Ceux dont il souffrit les siflets;          [...]          Joins Carrier au trépas, monstre de          cruauté;          Collot [bis] ne l'as-tu pas mieux que          lui mérité.</p>	<p>A combination of iron and fire          Strikes the Lyonnais indiscriminately,          Collot punishes with this carnage,          Those whose jeers he endured;          [...]          Join Carrier in death, monster of cruelty;          Collot, Collot, you deserve no better than          he.</p>
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The repetition of the name of each accused in the final line solidifies their place as anti-revolutionary villains, and the melody evokes for its singers the memories of singing this song about other hated tyrants. Is this therefore a news song or editorial? It is a song that provokes its listeners to action through emotion, the very definition of propaganda one might argue, and a provocation that reminds us of the etymological origins of the word emotion in the French term *émouvoir*, ‘to move/to cause emotion’. It is this emotive aspect of news songs that is challenging for modern historians who strive for impartiality and objectivity in academic research. But to not engage in the performative aspects of these songs, and to not be moved by them, is to ignore their impact and purpose. To do these songs justice they must be embraced in all their messy and often unpleasant feelings.

## Conclusion

Although the itinerant and precarious nature of the profession encouraged a perception of news-singers as dubious figures, they were nevertheless primary sources of news and entertainment, to whom people from all walks of life listened, and with whom they also joined in song. Reliability of information was only one criterion of quality; emotion was another. News songs were designed to move people, to sympathy, to ridicule and to religious meditation, and by paying close attention to the complex and symbiotic relationships between composition (melody, structure and lyrics), printing (broadside, pamphlet, songbook), and performance (sellers and audience) we can understand a great deal about their reception among the populace of early modern Europe. To do this we must pay attention to balladry’s unique qualities: the conjunction of melody, text and performance could be exploited in a sophisticated way by those who needed no literacy – textual or musical – in order to do so. We need to explore news songs in all of their contexts: textual, musical, illustrative, historical and social. We must hear them, perform them, and investigate the melodies that can reveal clues about how they may have been received by their contemporary audiences. Where there are no known tunes, attention to metre, rhythm and vocabulary can also provide vital insight into the tone and the meaning of the songs. Finally, we must incorporate songs more actively into our histories of news – they allow us to access the manner in which citizens of all social classes, education levels, genders and ages managed the news of the world in which they lived.

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*Barziletta nova della liberatione de Bologna. Cù la recuperatione de Bressa et perdita de Venetiani et la tornata del exercito del Christianissimo Re di Francia a Bologna adosso alli Hispani. Cosa bella et da piacere.* (c. 1512)

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<sup>1</sup> Mangold, *Marckschiff oder Marckschiffergespräch*, quoted in Cheesman, *Shocking Ballad Picture Show*, 46-47.



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Ich solls forthin wol anders machen:  
wil mer new Zeitung kaufen ein  
dieweil die jetzt so angnemd seyn.  
Kan sie selber tichten zu zeiten  
obs war, hat nicht vil zu bedeuten.  
Betrogen seyn wil jetzt die Welt  
Kaufen Lügen umb gutes Geld.  
Je feister Lüg, je besser Kauff,  
Das weiß gar wol der Sängler hauff.

<sup>2</sup> Fisher, 'Song, Confession, and Criminality', 620.

<sup>3</sup> For the associations between weavers, reading, and Protestant dissent in early modern England, see Spufford, 'The importance of religion', 45-46.

<sup>4</sup> Fisher, 'Song, Confession, and Criminality', 633.

<sup>5</sup> 'Chansonnier dit de Maurepas'.

<sup>6</sup> Darnton, *Poetry and the Police*, 191ff. Interrogation of Jean Le Mercier: 'Que l'hiver derner le déclarant, qui était au séminaire de St. Nicolas du Chardonnet, entendit un jour le sieur Théret, qui était alors dans le même séminaire, réciter des couplets d'une chanson contre la cour commençant par ces mots, 'Qu'une bâtarde de catin'; que le déclarant demanda ladite chanson audit sieur Théret, qui la lui donna et à laquelle le déclarant a fait quelques notes et a même marqué sur la copie par lui écrite et donnée audit sieur Guyard ... Ajouté le déclarant que sur la même feuille contenant ladite chanson à lui donnée par ledit sieur Théret il y avait deux pièces de vers au sujet du Prétendant, ... lesquelles deux pièces le déclarant a copiées et a déchirées dans le temps sans les avoir communiquées à personne.'

<sup>7</sup> Fox, 'Ballads, Libels and Popular Ridicule'.

<sup>8</sup> Sabeau, *Power in the Blood*, 79.

<sup>9</sup> Salzberg and Rospocher, 'Street Singers', 15.

<sup>10</sup> Cited in Raymond, 'Parker, Martin'.

<sup>11</sup> McIlvenna, 'The Power of Music'.

<sup>12</sup> Fisher, 'Song, Confession, and Criminality', 637.

<sup>13</sup> Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda*; McIlvenna, 'The Power of Music'.

<sup>14</sup> van Orden, 'Female "Complaintes"', 838.

<sup>15</sup> Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*.

<sup>16</sup> *The Spectator* 85, 7 June 1711.

<sup>17</sup> Cavendish, *The Triumphant Widow*, 7.

<sup>18</sup> van Orden, 'Cheap Print and Street Song'.

<sup>19</sup> *Le Rosier des chansons nouvelles*.

<sup>20</sup> *Sommaire de tous les recueils des Chansons*.

<sup>21</sup> Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris*, 'Il y a encore les complaintes sur les pendus et les roués, que le peuple écoute la larme à l'oeil et qu'il achète avec empressement. Quand, par bonheur pour le poète du Pont-Neuf, quelque personnage illustre monte sur l'échafaud, sa mort est rimée et chantée avec le violon. Ainsi à Paris tout est matière à chanson; et quiconque, maréchal de France ou pendu, n'a pas été chansonné, a beau faire, il demeurera inconnu au peuple. Je soutiens ici que Desrues dans les carrefours de la capitale est plus illustre que Voltaire.'

<sup>22</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 9 July 1740.

<sup>23</sup> Salzberg, 'The Lyre, the Pen and the Press', 258.

<sup>24</sup> *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 24 April 1745; 8 December 1731.

<sup>25</sup> For pictorial representations of these paintings see Cheesman, *Shocking Ballad Picture Show*.

<sup>26</sup> Fisher, *Music, Piety, and Propaganda*, 214.

<sup>27</sup> Cited in Cheesman, *Shocking Ballad Picture Show*, 44.

<sup>28</sup> *A Caveat for Cut-purses*.

<sup>29</sup> Wiltenburg, *Crime and Culture in Early Modern Germany*, 15.

<sup>30</sup> Diefendorf, 'Prologue to a Massacre', 1075-1076; Ruble, 'L'arrestation de Jean de Hans'.

<sup>31</sup> Bordeaux, *Le recueil des chansons*.

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<sup>35</sup> *Ein neue Zeitung, So geschehen in Francken*. I would like to thank Abaigéal Warfield with her help with this source.

<sup>36</sup> Gómez, 'Broadsides and Public Opinion', 241.

<sup>37</sup> Gómez, 'Broadsides and Public Opinion', 241.

<sup>38</sup> Fox, 'Ballads, Libels and Popular Culture', 63.

<sup>39</sup> *Ein schönes Buß-Gesängelein/ Allen Menschen zu einer Auffmunterung/ eines guten Wandels unnd Lebens/ mercklich in Truck gebracht/ und für Augen gestellt.*

<sup>40</sup> Sabeau, *Power in the Blood*, 81.

<sup>41</sup> du Bartas, *Cantique sur la victoire d'Yvry*.

<sup>42</sup> Mironneau, 'Aux sources de la légende d'Henri IV'.

<sup>43</sup> *Carrier a commencé la marche.*

<sup>44</sup> Mason, *Singing the French Revolution*, 94-98.