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Sounds of Sediton: Music and Emotion in Ireland, 1780–1845¹

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'Tis songs that is most to be dreaded of all
things in Ireland, says the chief Secretary.
Singing, Billy, is a bad custom; it infects a
whole country, and makes them half mad,
because they rejoice and forget their cares, and
forget their duty, and forget their betters.²

In 1844, when Daniel O'Connell and a number of other leaders of the Repeal Association were tried for sedition, the role of music in promoting social disorder was a matter of heated debate. In his opening speech for the prosecution, the attorney general argued that through the newspaper *The Nation*, the association had published the 'poem' 'The Memory of the Dead'.³ This 'poem', which long predated its publication in *The Nation*, was a popular folk song that asked young men to commemorate the dead who fell in the Rebellion of 1798 by rising in their stead.⁴ During the course of the prosecution, it was argued that such seditious songs were handed out at the Monster Meetings, during which temperance bands marched along with the public to a set place where O'Connell would address the crowd. Mr Whiteside for the defence denied that the music played at such events was seditious, arguing that 'O yes! These Temperance bands did conspire, confederate, combine and agree to murder harmony', but that the harmony disturbed was musical! He continued: 'Oh, say the Crown prosecutors, these fellows will not get drunk and break each others' heads; they will not go to jail'.⁵ In doing so, Whiteside alluded to a key tension that arose from the attendance of temperance

bands at ‘seditious’ events – temperance bands were intended to tame the lower classes, to direct them into peaceable behaviour, rather than the reverse.⁶

This ambiguity regarding the social role of music was also used to good effect by the United Irishman William Sampson in his satire on treason trials, *A Faithful Report of the Trial of Hurdy Gurdy*.⁷ In this work, Hurdy Gurdy, a stringed musical instrument, was tried and found guilty of treason for playing the French Revolutionary song ‘Ça Ira’. As the prosecution argued at Gurdy’s trial, ‘Gentlemen, there is sedition in the *sound*, and a libel in every *note* of it; and *these* wicked fanatics well knew, that there was no way in this refined age, so effectual to promote their diabolical purposes, and to work upon the feelings and passions of men, as by calling in the assistance of the finest of the fine arts’.⁸ Satirizing similar evidence presented at the trial of Thomas Muir for sedition in Scotland, as well as offering a commentary on similar trials in 1790s Ireland, Sampson placed a musical instrument on trial because it was known to direct the passions, but towards what end was more ambiguous.

The topic of popular music and its effects on the population caused considerable concern in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland. Lamentations by social commentators about the treasonable nature of popular songs frequently accompanied discussions of ballads and songs in an era of growing antiquarian interest in the culture of the lower orders, a concern heightened during a period when ideas of democracy and revolution threatened traditional seats of power. Over the course of the nineteenth century, various social groups made a concerted attempt to push the lower classes into orderly and often elite-controlled music-making, including temperance and church choirs.⁹ The ability of song to ‘inflamm the passions’ was commonly accepted during the period, yet the basis of this belief and its implications for our understanding of social order have not been fully explored by historians. This article seeks to explain this concern amongst the Irish ruling classes by

placing it within a larger discussion of eighteenth-century understandings of social order and the nature of the emotions. It does not attempt to assess to what extent such music was actually seditious but rather to unpick why it was understood to hold this potential. In doing so, this article contributes to a wider discussion on the role of emotion in understandings of social and political order during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The role of emotion in the formation of social and political order and disorder at the end of the eighteenth century is a topic of current debate. Nicole Eustace's *Passion is the Gale* is perhaps the most significant contribution to this discussion. In it, she argues that in Revolutionary Pennsylvania, the social elite justified their political power by claiming that they alone had the correct combination of passion and reason that enabled wise rule, but this was undermined by Thomas Paine's assertion that passion was common to all humanity, which the middling sorts used as the basis for their claims to political and social rights during the Revolution. According to Eustace, it was the ability to feel, and to feel in particular ways, that marked a social group as ready for political rights in the mind of the eighteenth-century public.¹⁰

Similarly, Randall McGowen, in his exploration of prison reform in early nineteenth-century Britain, highlights how the question of the emotional 'potential' of the lower classes was at the heart of debates around imprisonment and capital punishment. Those who pressed for the abolishment of the death penalty thought that hangings hardened the hearts of the lower classes and reinforced their unfeeling criminal behaviour, whereas a proper emotional education in sympathy would make them useful members of the polity. The opposition replied that criminal behaviour was the product of too much emotion, and so the terror that accompanied hangings was required to keep criminality in check.¹¹ In contrast, according to Luke Gibbons, observing the public's emotional response to executions in early eighteenth-century Ireland informed Irish politician and philosopher Edmund Burke's theories of social

order, leading him to question whether terror was the most effective method of control.¹² This article builds upon these contributions by exploring how eighteenth-century understandings of emotion informed the social elite's interpretation of sedition and treason in Ireland in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It then discusses how this framework for understanding sedition also informed contemporary views of music, and of sound more broadly, implicating music in seditious behaviour and in the maintenance of political and social order.

The question of how violent Ireland was, and how worried the ruling elite were about such violence, is a topic of ongoing debate. The eighteenth century is viewed as a time when Protestant landowners secured their political and economic domination of the country; yet whether their actions to ensure such domination reflected a deep-seated insecurity or a sense of entitlement about their social position is not easily determined.¹³ It was also a period when the make-up of the political community was under discussion. In addition to a growing and increasingly vocal middle-class Catholic population, Ireland's public sphere flourished, with a growing print trade and newspaper industry, coffee houses in Belfast and Dublin, and the rise of militia and volunteer organizations.¹⁴ Yet it is debatable whether these developments, encompassing and being utilized by people across social ranks and denominational divides, can be viewed as an alternative political culture in opposition to a ruling Anglo-Irish elite.

Influenced by the American and French Revolutions, Ireland, like other regions, featured a number of political campaigns, as well as social unrest, that challenged the ruling consensus during this period and acted to expand the political community.¹⁵ From the 1770s onwards, there was a push for greater legislative independence for the Irish parliament, which was finally granted in 1782 in the limited form of 'Grattan's parliament'. This push was supported by a large body of Volunteers, numbering more than 100,000 men, who had nominally been organized to protect Ireland from French invasion but had become a much

wider political movement, encompassing women and, at times, well-to-do Catholics under the umbrella of 'patriotism'. They had previously campaigned for free trade between England and Ireland, and in 1783 they held a Volunteer Convention in Dublin to demand greater political reform of the parliament. The convention's demands were refused, and the number of Volunteers subsequently dwindled, but their members sometimes reappeared in other political organizations later in the century.¹⁶

The Volunteer movement was followed after the French Revolution by more radical political demands. In 1791 the United Irishmen were formed. Like many radical organizations of the era, it had an elite, university-educated leadership, heavily influenced by Thomas Paine and French Republicanism, and a large plebeian following, mainly amongst urban artisans in northern Ireland and Dublin, whose politics were more varied, often falling at the radical end of constitutional reform.¹⁷ The cross-denominational United Irishmen movement grew until it finally led to a quickly quashed open rebellion in 1798.¹⁸ In 1800 Ireland was granted full political union with Britain, dissolving the Irish parliament. The United Irishman Robert Emmet led a minor rebellion in Dublin in 1803, and its failure ended the movement.¹⁹ By this date, however, Daniel O'Connell had begun his campaign of constitutional reform, which aimed to emancipate Catholics and later to repeal the Union of 1800.²⁰ Within the heightened context of anxiety emerging after the American and, particularly, the French Revolution, the state carefully monitored such movements. At particular moments, notably in the 1790s, after the 1803 rebellion and in the 1840s, the state used treason and sedition trials to clamp down on 'subversive' behaviour.²¹

The role of music in these movements is contested, particularly in relation to the uses of Irish popular song. Irish ballads were consumed by all social classes: they were enjoyed in theatres and concert halls in urban centres, sold in songbooks for the middle classes, and distributed on broadsides and via oral culture amongst those lower down the social ladder.²²

For some, this music's popularity reflected a form of 'patriotic purchasing', an attempt to form a distinctive Irish identity, which depending on the context could be situated within or beyond the British state. For others, such music's popularity simply reflected its aesthetic value to an Irish audience.²³ This debate is complicated by contemporary Irish responses to their own ancient history. As Clare O'Halloran argues, popular song, often associated with an ancient bardic tradition, was viewed in eighteenth-century Scotland and England as evidence of their ancestors' 'primitive' genius; in contrast, many in Ireland rejected the label of 'primitive' for their past as it was too similar to how they were imagined in contemporary colonial policy.²⁴ Irish and British responses to popular song were therefore varied and complex. Nonetheless, many, including the legislature and judiciary, imagined such song as carrying seditious, even treasonous, intent, as is reflected in both their writings and their responses to ballad singers.

Sounds of Sedition

In 1773 the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* defined a ballad as

a kind of song, adapted to the capacity of the lower class of people; who being mightily taken with this species of poetry, are thereby not a little influenced in the conduct of their lives. Hence we find, that seditious and designing men never fail to spread ballads among the people, with a view to gain them over to their side.²⁵

Similarly, Lord Cloncurry noted in the 1790s that 'if the business conducted was treason, it was carefully wrapped up in the jokes and the ribaldry commonly said or sung' in lower-class communities.²⁶ Nearly 100 years later, William Archer's songbook for the Orange Order observed:

The spirit of song has ever shed its benign influence over the heart of man,
brightening up the fire of its energies, and warming into sweet emotions, its

sympathies and affections. Oft has the magic number of the lyric muse, awakened into animation the nobler feelings of our nature which else might have slept inert and hidden.²⁷

As the eighteenth-century philosopher James Beattie argued, ‘the end of all genuine music, is to introduce into the human mind certain affections, or susceptibilities of affection’.²⁸

Whether for good or evil ends, the power of music to shape emotion, stir the passions and inflame the mind was commonly recognized throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Jonah Barrington, an Irish judge, made this clear when reflecting in his memoirs on his participation in the Irish Volunteer movement in the 1780s. He bemoaned that the air chosen as the march for the Volunteers had ‘no merit whatever, being neither *grand*, nor *martial*, nor *animating*’. He continued that this was most evident when the Volunteers’ march was compared to the music of the revolutionaries in France: ‘Though composed to excite enthusiasm in both instances, who can hear the “Marseillais Hymn”, “Ça Ira” and the other revolutionary music of France, and consider the frantic enthusiasm which they excited, without thinking that the sober, stupid tones of the Volunteer’s march were more calculated for a soporific than a stimulant’.²⁹

The power of music was understood to be related to its effects on the body. Music evoked emotion by producing a physical response within the body, which in turn formed the appropriate emotion. How music affected the body was a topic of interest. For many philosophers, following Jean-Jacques Rousseau, music had been the original expressive form, predating language in early societies, as it was best able to communicate the emotion that drove primitive humankind: ‘It is neither hunger nor thirst, but love, hate, pity, anger that pulled from them the first utterances’.³⁰ As a medium of communication, music was able to convey the emotion expressed by the singer and, in turn, to provoke feeling in the listener. For Rousseau, these first utterances were musical, as language required a higher level of

cognition and the use of reason, which controlled or even removed language's ability to express emotion.³¹ Despite the evolution of language, music was believed to have retained its power over the emotions, appealing to primitive instincts.

Although the exact mechanics of how music evoked emotion were open to question, following on from the classical tradition and particularly Plato's *Republic*, only a few individuals rejected the idea that music and passion were linked.³² This led to a debate on the relationship between particular sounds and emotions, with considerable energy invested in exploring and charting what tones created specific passions in the body.³³ Beattie noted that 'courage is apt to vent itself in a strong tone of voice', while soft music was analogous with gentle emotions.³⁴ Interestingly, he was sceptical that music could evoke negative emotions, arguing that

it might be practicable, by means of harsh tones, irregular rhythm, and continual dissonance, to work the mind into a disagreeable state, and to produce horrible thoughts and criminal propensity, as well as painful sensations. But this would not be music ...³⁵

In contrast, Edmund Burke's discussion of music was more encompassing, acknowledging the power of a variety of sounds on the body. He divided sound, and particularly music, into the 'sublime' and the 'beautiful', where the sublime 'forced' while the beautiful 'flattered' the body into emotional compliance with its sentiment.³⁶

The relationship between music and emotion became central to shaping musical style in the late eighteenth century, with greater consideration given to emotional impact when writing music and determining its cultural value.³⁷ Particular genres of music became prized, so that Rousseau argued that Italian opera was superior because of its ability to more perfectly join lyrics with music to express particular emotions.³⁸ This led to musical fashions following emotional trends, so that, like in fiction, the eighteenth-century culture of

sensibility led to a demand for music that expressed ‘delicate sentiment’, making the strong tones and passion of the baroque outmoded for a time, and reflecting the emotional control that was a requirement for political rights in the imagination of the period.³⁹ It also led some philosophers to give primacy to music with lyrics, arguing as Beattie did that ‘in vocal music, truly such, the words render the expression determinate, and fix the hearer’s attention upon it’, ensuring that ‘the hearer is in no danger of being seduced from the principal air’.⁴⁰ Drawing on the older Renaissance tradition, lyrics, associated with language and so with reason, were understood to contain and control the passion of the music.⁴¹

Following Rousseau, it was also acknowledged that certain sounds were connected with particular places, events or sentiments, allowing music to activate the emotions through association. A person’s upbringing, including their state of civilization and the peculiarities of different cultures, might shape their musical reactions. This was used to explain why musical styles varied across cultures.⁴² It also explained musical differences between social groups within a single nation. Some people were thought to have a natural ‘musical ear’, whilst others had to learn how to appreciate music. Beattie argued:

And though every person who hears, might no doubt, by instruction and long experience, be made sensible of the musical properties of sound, so far as to be in some measure gratified with good music and disgusted with bad; yet both his pain and his pleasure would be very different in kind and degree, from that which is conveyed by a true musical ear.⁴³

This created a hierarchy of musical appreciation that came to mirror social class, with those from the polite classes presumed to have a more sophisticated ear because they had greater emotional depth.

Musical forms, such as Italian opera, that were associated with complex emotional states, like melancholy or sublime glee, became highly prized and associated with polite

society; performances of such music commanded entrance fees that excluded all but the very rich. In contrast, music that was associated with more 'straightforward' or everyday emotions, such as love, grief and anger, was played in musical venues aimed at lower social groups and was found in balladry and popular song. Gender was also influential, with women playing a very small part in Italian opera, as the more complex musical and emotional forms were associated with male voices.⁴⁴ In this way, music became a tool for demarcating the emotional sophistication of the male elites, thereby reinforcing their role as the most appropriate social and political leaders.

This is not to say that the reception of music was not complex. In both Britain and Ireland, as elsewhere in Europe, there was some resistance to opera as a 'foreign import' that competed with native productions. In late eighteenth-century Ireland, much of this resistance came from the Volunteer movement, who thought opera 'unpatriotic' but also felt that the music was aesthetically unpleasing and that Italian castratos were unmanly and encouraged effeminacy.⁴⁵ In a context where much opera continued to be performed at private functions or for restrictively expensive prices, such resistance may also have reflected a democratic challenge to a model that associated musical and emotional sophistication with access to a form of music unaffordable to those lower down the social ladder.

Balladry and popular song were not ignored or disliked by polite society. Indeed, many popular forms were prized for their simplicity and purity of emotional expression, as well as the opportunity to show patriotic support for national music. In a period of increased antiquarian interest, informed by popular discussions about the meaning of 'civilized' society and its consequences for national well-being, the emotional simplicity of popular music and balladry was often viewed as providing insight into an earlier state of society.⁴⁶ The social groups associated with such music were in turn characterized either as being 'uncivilized' or, more generously, as maintaining the traditions of an earlier time. Whether due to historical,

patriotic or aesthetic interest, this led to a demand for ballads and popular songs amongst the middle and upper classes, supplied in the form of songbooks and music collections, spurring numerous antiquarian and folk collectors into action.⁴⁷ This was complicated in Ireland by a resistance amongst all social classes to imagining the country's musical outputs as arising from an ancient past, but such music remained popular, and for many it was rendered political, whether as a 'patriotic purchase' or, for others, like Daniel O'Connell and the Young Irelanders, as a mechanism for creating national feeling.⁴⁸ In the political context of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, the link between popular song and the lower classes also led to such music being associated with the threat such groups posed to social order, allowing the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* to make this connection explicit in its definition of the ballad.

Treason and Seditious as Emotion

Late eighteenth-century society generally agreed that emotions were politically important. Whereas early modern leaders had been content with obedient behaviour, rather than the winning of hearts and minds, in the late eighteenth century it was increasingly believed that behaviour should be accompanied by appropriate sentiment.⁴⁹ This reflected a broader concern within Enlightenment culture with hypocrisy and a belief that the public man, and this was a gendered ideal, should reflect the private. More fundamentally, it built upon a conception of emotion as the impetus for action.⁵⁰ Emotions were viewed as the fundamental drivers of human behaviour, causing people to act.⁵¹ In this context, emotional intent became implicated in acts of treason and sedition. Treason was the act of imagining the death of the king and instigating events that could lead to his death (such as a political uprising) but was also understood in emotional terms. The charge for treason stated that the accused had acted 'not having the fear of God in his heart ... and entirely withdrawing the love and true and due

obedience which every subject of our said lord the King should and of right ought to bear'.⁵²

The act of treason involved a change in emotional state from that of the obedient subject to that of the traitor. Similarly, sedition was the act of 'raising commotions or disturbances in the state' with the intent of creating 'discord' between the king and his people.⁵³ The language of sedition – to disturb, to create discord – used emotional terms, and during the trials of the period sedition was understood as the arousing of seditious emotion either in the defendant or in others. During the treason trials arising from the 1803 rebellion, the judge Baron George noted that the rebels had 'work[ed] on the passions of the profligate, and the fears of the timid by the most lofty boastings'.⁵⁴ Similarly, during the Napoleonic Wars, Judge Robert Day in his sentencing speech criticized John Magee, editor of the *Dublin Evening Post*, for

keep[ing] the people by hireling and hostile Journals, in a state of perpetual fever and delirious discontent with their governors, to alarm those governors for their safety at home, and thus to disable Ireland from taking her share abroad in this gloriant and triumphant conflict for the liberties of the world.⁵⁵

This perception of traitors' ability to evoke seditious feeling in others reflected the broader cultural understanding of emotion and particularly the belief that emotion was a transferrable entity. Emotion appeared to be a force of its own that could drift and infect people (like a disease), rather than being enacted by individuals.⁵⁶ For Enlightenment philosophers, whose works were popular amongst the Irish elite and were taught at the Irish, Scottish and English universities their sons attended, all emotion was 'naturally contagious'.⁵⁷ As the Irish philosopher Frances Hutcheson argued, individuals 'not only sorrow with the distressed, and rejoice with the prosperous, but admiration or surprise ... raises a correspondent commotion of mind in all who behold him'.⁵⁸ Far from viewing it as a problem, however, many Enlightenment thinkers placed this emotional connection at the

heart of the polity. Social relationships were to be built upon sympathy or fellow feeling, where the moral (and male) individual was one who could imagine himself in the place of another and not only act but feel accordingly. The ability to exercise sympathy created a sense of fraternity amongst members of the polity and would allow them to act for the social good. This belief was at the heart of campaigns to expand the political community across Britain, France and North America at the end of the eighteenth century.⁵⁹

This emotional model had its downside. As David Hume noted, ‘popular sedition, party zeal, a devoted obedience to factious leaders; these are some of the most visible, though less laudable effects of this social sympathy in human nature’.⁶⁰ Likewise, Adam Ferguson, who rejected the idea that sympathy enabled the social good, because of its ability to be misapplied, argued that ‘like every other natural disposition, it is susceptible of abuse, and by no means a safe or adequate principle of estimation’.⁶¹ The danger of allowing sympathy to determine the social good was that it was not guaranteed to lead to moral virtue but could be corrupted by individual and group desires. Most philosophers, to different extents, responded to this concern by applying reason. As Burke noted:

Enthusiasm is a sort of instinct, in those who possess it, that operates like all instincts, better than a mean Species of Reason. It is true indeed that enthusiasm often misleads. So does reason too ... But, I believe that we act most when we act with all the powers of our soul; when we use our Enthusiasm to elevate and expand our reasoning: and our reasoning to check the roving of our enthusiasm.⁶²

An explicitly gendered model, reason allowed men to exercise control over their emotions, by allowing them to assess their emotional responses objectively and, eventually, emote in socially appropriate and virtuous ways. The significance of this idea to the eighteenth-century imagination was reflected in responses to Burke’s *Reflections on Revolution in France*, as

critique across the political spectrum accused him of being alarmist: 'You foster every emotion till the fumes, mounting to the brain, dispel the sober suggestions of reason'.⁶³

Young men could be educated in proper emotional expression. As Dana Harrington demonstrates, the elocutionists Thomas Sheridan and John Walker taught that sympathy, and the related concept of taste, was formed through proper education. Young students were taught to mimic appropriate emotional expression in their speech and bodily gestures, as natural internal emotions would be perfected through outward performance.⁶⁴ This was closely related to the idea of 'contagious emotions', except that the emotional response in the individual was created by their own behaviour, rather than by the behaviour of another. As Walker argues, following Burke,

There is a connection between the internal feeling of a passion, and the external expression of it, that we cannot put ourselves in the posture; or attitude, of any passion, without communicating a certain degree of the passion itself to the mind.⁶⁵

Despite the potential of education, some Enlightenment philosophers believed certain social groups were unable to apply reason to their passions. In *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, for example, Adam Smith declared 'humanity' or sensibility to be natural to elite women's character, while men in turn were 'generous'. Generosity required a combination of sensibility and self-command (which required the application of reason to emotion), and women lacked the latter.⁶⁶ As Jane Rendall suggests, women's lack of self-command over their emotions meant that they were unsuited for full participation in public life.⁶⁷ The lower classes were similarly excluded from the polity, but their exclusion was not based only on a lack of self-command but also on a lack of sensibility. Smith argued that there were those in the population who 'behave very decently ... who yet perhaps, never felt the sentiment upon the propriety of which we found our approbation of their conduct, but acted merely from a regard to what they saw were the established rules of behaviour'. He continued:

None but those of the happiest mould are capable of suiting, with exact justness, their sentiments and behaviour to the smallest difference of situation ... The coarse clay of which the bulk of mankind are formed cannot be wrought up to such perfection.

He concluded positively, stating that all but a very few can be educated to behave with tolerable decency.⁶⁸ This model excluded ‘the bulk of mankind’ from political rights; without the appropriate combination of sentiment and self-control, the lower classes were unable to become part of the sympathetic fraternity of the polity.

This framework informed contemporary understandings of sedition and treason. In many respects, sedition became a form of uncontrolled enthusiasm, while patriotism, loyalty and justice were markers of the exercise of reason on the passions. In a context where emotional self-control was a marker of a person’s capacity to exercise political rights, sedition – the antithesis of political order – came to reflect a lack of that same self-control. In this, it is important to remember that those who contested the current political order (‘the seditious’) generally did not understand their behaviour as disorderly but rather as a legitimate political expression and contest. These ideas influenced how sedition and treason were interpreted within the Irish court. During the trial of John Begg for treason arising from the 1803 rebellion, his defence lawyer addressed the jury, saying:

The law of the rebels is violence ... terror and passion preside in their councils – justice and mercy are strangers: Show them the awful contrast between usurped and legitimate authority – demonstrate to them and to the world, by your verdict, that coolness and deliberate wisdom, candid investigation, dispassionate inquiry, and impartial decision, are the attributes of that law, at which they have contemptuously spurned.⁶⁹

Emotional control was used as the marker of political legitimacy in the face of rebellious sentiment.

The various strands of this belief system were particularly evident during the trial of Robert Emmet. As the university-educated son of a physician, Emmet should have demonstrated control over his passions but instead was the leader of a rebellion. During the opening speeches of his trial in 1803, the Crown prosecution read from a letter attributed to Emmet:

I have ardent, and I trust rational hopes; but if it is not to be the case, I thank God for having gifted me with a sanguine disposition: to that disposition I run from reflection, and if my hopes are without foundation, if a precipice is opening under my feet, from which duty will not suffer me to run back, I am grateful for that sanguine disposition which leads me to the brink.⁷⁰

Emmet's purported words demonstrated the role of emotion in treasonable decision-making. He believed his hopes were both 'ardent' and 'rational', applying reason to his passion, but at the same time, his words suggested uncertainty – 'he runs from reflection', from the application of reason to his emotional state. Emmet blamed his 'sanguine', extroverted and passionate nature for driving his ambition, allowing his chemical make-up to offer an explanation for why his elite education had not constrained his feelings and behaviour. His gratitude towards this aspect of his nature, which he recognized had led him to the brink, highlighted his disregard for social order and for the proper manly self-control required of the political elite.⁷¹ The emphasis on this seeming disregard of social norms for elite manly behaviour was no doubt intended to invoke revulsion in a jury of elite men, who should have endorsed this code in their daily lives.

Having read from Emmet's letter, the Crown lawyer responded to it:

No man who had not felt enthusiasm could describe it so well – ill-fated and delirious passion, which bestows the colour of virtue upon the extravagance of vice, and feeds with rapture upon the delusions of hope ... But let me call upon the sober

understandings of those who never felt its operation, and ask why they participate in its madness? Can the deluded peasantry be brought to join in wild projects, without feeling the impulse that gave them birth? ... or do they not rather imagine ... that it is composed of wisdom, caution and prudence? --- they little know, that it is a composition of heated minds and disordered passions, which supersede the judgement and annihilate the understanding.⁷²

The Crown lawyer here made Emmet's failures explicit, emphasizing not only his inability to exercise control over his 'enthusiasm', and thus his failure to recognize virtue and the social good, but also his unsuitability as a leader. According to the prosecution's interpretation, the lower classes innately trusted Emmet, as a member of the social elite, and relied on his superior understanding to lead them towards virtue. In leading them into treason, Emmet had failed in his duty as a member of his social class. In emphasizing this, the prosecution not only compounded Emmet's wrongdoing but reinforced the political status quo, shutting down the claim to political rights for a larger part of the population that was central to the United Irishmen's ideology.⁷³ Through participating in treasonable behaviour and following an inappropriate leader, the lower classes demonstrated that they were not ready to be part of the polity.

Unlike the conservative elite in Revolutionary America, the Crown prosecution did not deny the significance of emotion to political life.⁷⁴ This was not the triumph of reason over sympathy. As the prosecution argued in their summary:

A genuine love of liberty inculcates an affection for our friends, our king and country – reverence for their lives, an anxiety for their safety; a feeling which advances from private to public life ... I know the progress of every good mind is uniform; it begins with abhorrence for the crime, and ends with compassion for the criminal, ... but it must not be carried so far as to interfere with the administration of public justice.⁷⁵

Emotion remained central to understanding political rights, but who had the ability to master emotion in the pursuit of a virtuous society was open to debate.

Seditious Singing

Under the contagion model of emotion, music – and especially song – was particularly suited to both distributing and heightening emotional sentiment. The act of singing extended the individual's physical presence, and, for a time at least, it marked out that space as part of the person. In doing so, it allowed the transference of the singer's emotion across a broader area than normal and so had greater potential to disrupt. It created a bond between the singer and the audience, absorbing the latter into the performance and acting on their emotions.⁷⁶ Music was usually consumed in a group, which heightened its emotional impact. As Beattie noted:

We sympathise with the emotions of the audience, and this heightens our own. For I apprehend, no person of sensibility would chuse to be the sole spectator of a play, if he had it in his power to see it in company with a multitude.⁷⁷

This is not to say that all music had predictable social effects. As it was generally recognized that culture shaped appreciation for particular styles of music, people might respond in a variety of ways. Moreover, music could overpower the listener, forcing unwanted responses. Beattie argued that 'certain sounds [had] a mechanical influence on certain parts of the human body' that could not be resisted.⁷⁸ Similarly, Burke noted, 'Excessive loudness alone is sufficient to overpower the soul, to suspend its action and to fill it with terror'.⁷⁹ Through doing so, music held the potential to go further than causing sedition; it not only roused the passions, leading to potential disorder, but became an act of violence itself. Just as military drums, in addition to acting as a marching aid, created fear in the enemy, so music through its ability to evoke emotion in even a resistant listener operated as an act of violence against the listener. As Richard Leppert argues, the ability of music to

act on the ‘sensate body’, to evoke feeling, gave it power, yet the nature of its power was ambiguous – music could be used to pacify and distract, as well as to provoke.⁸⁰

This ambiguity was one of the central reasons that music caused anxiety during the period; its social effects were unpredictable, and its uses varied. Nor was there a straightforward understanding of particular forms of music as more seditious than others. For the purposes of securing convictions in court, ballads generally had to have seditious lyrics, with emphasis placed on the text of the song. As I explore at length elsewhere, a number of investigations into seditious singing revolved around debates on the correct interpretation of lyrics within songs, reinforcing the text’s significance.⁸¹ Nonetheless, it is also clear that beyond the space of the court, all levels of Irish society appreciated that instrumental music could be seditious.

J. Carnegie’s letter to Charles Grant, the Chief Secretary, who effectively oversaw the day-to-day governance of Ireland for the British administration, explained the problem with a popular circulating ballad, ‘New Sheela na Guira’. ‘Sheela na Guira’ was a popular ballad air often used as the tune for nationalist ballad lyrics.⁸² This ‘new’ ballad’s lyrics, which alluded to millennial prophecies that promised an end to Protestant British rule, were too ambiguous to use as the basis of a sedition charge, but Carnegie argued, ‘This ballad is well understood and implicitly believed by all the lower order of the R[oman] C[atholics]’, before going on to explain the significance of ‘Sheela na Guira’ to this social group.⁸³ As Carnegie recognized, instrumental music could hold seditious potential, through association if not by means of the sound itself. Another version of the same ballad sent to the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland in the same year contained the musical pun: ‘Trifles light as air are of Rebellion indication strong as the loud cannons roar’.⁸⁴

As this suggests, that music affected audiences in different ways complicated the more straightforward association of particular aesthetic musical styles with specific emotional

responses. The Irish songwriter Thomas Moore's work turned from a pleasing and patriotic purchase on the British mainland or amongst Irish loyalists to seditious inspiration amongst Roman Catholic nationalists, and military marches moved from order to treason depending on who was involved.⁸⁵ Music philosophers' attempts to tie particular sounds to particular emotional states tended to break down in practice as the varied possibilities and responses to music emerged. Yet what remained consistent was the belief that music acted on the emotions and so was implicated in social order and disorder, potentially destabilizing every social relationship, whether between genders, between social classes or between nations.

Music was a central part of late eighteenth-century campaigns to reshape the political community within Ireland. The Volunteer movement published songs in its newspaper, *The Volunteer's Journal or Irish Herald*. The United Irishmen sang as part of their meetings and after campaign dinners. They distributed broadsheets, booklets and pamphlets full of music which drew heavily on the ideas of 'liberty, fraternity, equality' and included translations of French Revolutionary songs, including the 'Marsellaise Hymn' and 'Ça Ira'; their members were prosecuted for posting such music on their shop doors.⁸⁶ As William Brundage argues, such songs not only represented political movements, or provided evidence of their existence, but were part of the movement, in a similar way to campaign dinners or violent rebellions.⁸⁷ They acted as part of the protest, creating fervour for social change.

As a result, performing music and song could become an act of treason or sedition. Music, especially songs with lyrics that described events, allowed the listener to not only imagine but feel the event being portrayed, and given that treason required only imagining the death of the king, it could implicate the performers in that crime. Such performances allowed musicians and singers to experience, at least at an emotional level, the act of open rebellion and so provided a vicarious alternative and/or acted as preparation for other events for those who wished to take their rebellion further.⁸⁸ Disguising sedition within song was

not just a strategy to frustrate the censorship of the authorities, although music was certainly used in this way; it was the power of music to stir up feeling that made it a significant political tool.

Whatever the realities of the functions of Irish song for political movements, the responses of many from the Irish ruling and middle classes reflected a belief that such music was seditious.⁸⁹ In the 1820s, Thomas Crofton Croker, an Irish antiquarian, interpreted such music as ‘rebellious’, noting with amazement of his recently purchased collection of 400 ballads that it was ‘extraordinary that the most positive treason should for many years past have been published in Ireland, apparently without notice’.⁹⁰ The *Monthly Review* in 1777, summarizing Joseph Walker’s *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards*, complained that Irish bards were highly respected in Irish society but that ‘they glorifie in their rithmes’ the ‘most dangerous and desperate in all parts of disobedience and rebellious disposition ... and to young men make an example to follow’.⁹¹

As a result, the administration in Ireland showed considerable concern with the use of music by the lower classes. A number of letters to the Chief Secretary’s Office not only report the arrest of ballad singers for selling ‘seditious’ wares but provide a general sense of anxiety around the music-making practices of the lower orders. Robert Rawson of Kildare described the growth of the seditious Ribbonmen association and particularly noted that the lower-class Roman Catholics were singing songs in a similar manner as they had prior to the 1803 rebellion.⁹² A similar anxiety appeared in a letter from Patrick McGarrigle, County Down, who reported in 1821 that a large number of Roman Catholics marched ‘in military order, rank and file with musick [*sic*] and insignia’, emphasizing the fear this created amongst the Protestant members of the community.⁹³ As this report suggests, this concern was multifaceted, reflecting the inherent tension in music, which could create order as well as disorder.

On the one hand, the administration and a number of other elites worried that seditious music instilled treasonous sentiment; on the other, music also had the ability to create military order amongst a disparate and untrained mass. After the 1798 rebellion, a number of social commentators were concerned about the role of music in the collective response of large groups of the peasantry to the punishment of those that were prosecuted for sedition and treason. The latter went to collect the harvest of, or prepare the ground for, those who were now unable to do so, walking en masse in an orderly fashion accompanied by music. The Irish minister James Gordon, writing in *History of the Rebellion in Ireland*, thought that ‘their marching with music in a sort of military order’ as they moved from house to house ‘gave cause to suspect that the real object of these meetings was to accustom the men to a readiness to appointed places of convention, to give confidence to their own party, and to intimidate their opponents’.⁹⁴ Fifty years later, an identical concern was expressed with regard to O’Connell’s Monster Meetings, where ‘the [temperance] bands were dressed like the 54th [regimental] band, and ... the people came in marching order to the meeting’.⁹⁵ For many, the ability of music to create order made the peasantry a greater threat, as it instilled military discipline in those with treasonous intent.

The Frenchman Monsieur De Latocnaye took a different perspective, observing in his *Rambles through Ireland* that the assemblages were ‘conducted with the greatest order’ and ‘that during the whole process, the men, the women and the children united in a kind of song’. He thought that ‘one would never have suspected a seditious spirit, if one had not been told that it existed’. In resolving this tension, he believed that their orderliness evidenced, ‘with all their mutinous spirit, how easily the Irish may be governed’ and that their ‘frequent seditions only prove its sensibility’.⁹⁶ For De Latocnaye, the very fact that the Irish had enough feeling to question the way they were governed indicated that they were emotionally ready to be part of the political community.

A similar implication could also be found in discussions of the style of Irish folk music. A number of commentators observed that Irish music was particularly sorrowful. Croker thought that Irish song ‘excel[led] in the expression of plaintive sorrow’.⁹⁷ Similarly, Joseph Walker divided Irish music into three types, which included the ‘dolorious’ Golltraidheacht, and noted that ‘after the invasion of the English, the Irish were very much confined to this species of music’.⁹⁸ In a context where the peculiarities of the nation were understood to shape the style of music it produced, Croker implicitly and Walker explicitly were criticizing the current political order that produced such music. A people whose national song was marked by sadness were clearly being poorly governed. Describing Irish music as sorrowful also tied them into the contemporary debates around Ossian and the ‘noble savage’, where, as literatus Hugh Blair argued, the sorrow in Ossian’s text demonstrated the primitive ‘genius’ and authenticity of the poetry.⁹⁹ While not openly endorsing treason or sedition amongst the Irish, such commentary could give legitimacy to the Irish’s claims for political rights by emphasizing their emotional depth and readiness to be part of the polity. Yet, for others, the association of sorrow with the primitive could also reinforce the need for the Irish to be governed.

Beyond Music: Noise and Silence

The ambiguities that surrounded the relationship between music and social order also expanded beyond formal composition into understandings of noise more broadly, shaping and complicating how public displays of political expression were interpreted. Jonah Barrington’s lengthy description of his participation in the 1783 Volunteer Convention, when more than 100,000 men marched through Dublin to demand that the Irish parliamentary constitution be rewritten, highlights the tensions inherent in such displays. He wrote:

Every countenance spoke zeal, every eye expressed solicitude, every action proclaimed triumph: green ribands and handkerchiefs were waved from every window by the enthusiasm of its fair occupants; the crowds seemed to move on the house-tops; ribands were flung upon the delegates as they passed; yet it was not a loud or boisterous but a firm and awful enthusiasm. It was not the effervescence of a heated crowd – it was not the fiery ebullition of a glowing people – it was not sedition – it was liberty that inspired them: the heart bounded, though the tongue was motionless. [... Later in the day] the silent respect which had pervaded the entire population, during the procession, yielded to more lively feelings; – no longer could the people restrain their joy. At first, a low murmur ... at length burst into a universal cheer of triumph ... contributing the whole power of acclamation to glorify an assembly which they vainly conceived must be omnipotent.¹⁰⁰

Barrington emphasized that this exhibition was a display of patriotism, evidencing this with the controlled, orderly nature of the crowd. The noise, or lack thereof, of both the Volunteers and their supportive audience was central to this claim. The silence of the crowd symbolized their self-control over their emotions, or at least their passivity, while their joyous cheering clearly held an ambiguous meaning that led Barrington to emphasize it as loyal behaviour rather than sedition. Barrington was at pains to acknowledge that this was a display of emotion, of enthusiasm, connecting the Volunteers' political claims to their emotional intelligence.

In a very similar context, at Pennsylvania's 1788 July Fourth Procession, Benjamin Rush noted:

The order of the procession was regular, and begat corresponding order in all classes of spectators. A solemn silence reigned both in the streets and at the windows of the houses. This must be ascribed to the sublimity of the sight, and the pleasure it excited

in every mind; for sublime objects and intense pleasure never fail at producing silence!¹⁰¹

Rush used this example as proof that ‘We have become a nation!’ As Jason Frank argues, Rush interpreted the crowd’s reaction as a shared emotional response – a sympathetic union – to the sublime of the spectacle. The crowd thereby demonstrated their shared sensibility and so their nationhood.

The noise of the crowd fascinated a number of eighteenth-century philosophers and social commentators. Beattie thought the shouts of the multitudes were connected to ‘sublime affections’, while Burke thought that the noise ‘awakes a great and awful sensation in the mind’ and that

the sole strength of the sound, so amazes and confounds the imagination, that, in this staggering, and hurry of mind, the best established tempers can scarcely forbear being borne down, and joining in the common cry, and common resolution of the crowd.¹⁰²

For Burke, the sound of the crowd, and its action on the emotions, was overwhelming, even for those with the greatest self-control. As Gibbons demonstrates, the fear of the crowd inherent in Burke’s work perhaps reflected his own experiences of public outrage following executions in eighteenth-century Ireland, but it was a concern felt more widely.¹⁰³

Silence increasingly became a sign of social order and was encouraged in a variety of contexts. Gaols introduced solitary and silent areas as a form of control over the prison population, while local governments tried to shape the soundscape of the city.¹⁰⁴ Legitimate music was moved into theatres and private homes, while street performers and ballad singers became social problems, prosecuted as nuisances and vagrants.¹⁰⁵ More broadly, market stalls and street sellers were moved from city centres to specialized marketplaces, often on the outskirts of the town, changing the acoustic make-up of the town, as town councils attempted to impose order on their environment.¹⁰⁶

Despite these attempts, the ambiguous nature of sound disrupted the meanings the elite attempted to impose on public displays. The practical need for silence in the act of surprise meant that its relationship to innocence was never entirely straightforward. Descriptions of the 1803 rebellion referred to the silence of the rebels as they crept through the dark streets during their siege on Dublin Castle on a July night. In turn, the king's soldiers, who put down the rebellion, were described as marching to drums, a traditional military act. In these accounts, the significance of noise and silence was inverted, with silence symbolizing stealth and sneakiness, and the drums emphasizing order and might. Certain types of music-making, particularly marching bands, were viewed as patriotic; notably, in Ireland, the marching of loyalist and Orange organizations was defended in such terms.¹⁰⁷ Having said this, a number of traitors used the more common relation of silence to innocence in their defences. They argued that while they were physically present on the street, they had not spoken and so were innocent bystanders.¹⁰⁸

Conclusions

Like elsewhere, emotions in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Ireland were intimately related to ideas of social order. The ability to control one's emotions was a marker of self-command but also of loyalty to king and nation, and as such was associated with the social and political elite, viewed as the natural leaders of society. In contrast, the lower orders were believed to lack both the appropriate emotional sentiment and the self-control that would have enabled them to participate in the polity; this explained their fondness for sedition and rebellion. Those elites who also engaged in seditious behaviour, such as Robert Emmet, were portrayed as lacking self-command and failing to control their passions. Sedition and treason became emotion without the application of reason, investing all social groups who wished for political participation in a model of social order that had emotion at its heart.

In this context, music, with its ability to raise the passions and inflame the mind, was viewed as intimately connected to social order, maintaining or disrupting society as it acted on the emotions of the listener. Music was thought to inspire passion for social change, allowing the singer and audience to emotionally enact rebellion and preparing them for open insurrection. Its ability to change emotional sentiment from loyalty to sedition could itself be an act of treason. Yet music was an ambiguous medium, thought to have the power to pacify and create order as well as to provoke into rebellion. It could be used to instil discipline and military order in a mass of people, making them a more significant threat to the current administration or bringing them into the orderly fold of society. That music created order made it difficult for the Irish ruling classes to respond; the regimented behaviour of singing peasants as they marched from farm to farm was far from being a criminal offence. As a result, over the course of the nineteenth century, various social groups made a concerted attempt to push the lower classes into orderly and elite-controlled music-making, including temperance and church choirs.¹⁰⁹

The ambiguities of music led to silence becoming a preferable symbol of orderly behaviour, seen in the elites' attempts to control their social environment through removing the lower classes and their noises from central urban spaces. Yet even silence, with its associations with robbery and sneakiness, was not unambiguous, opening up spaces to contest the meaning of orderly and disorderly behaviour. Song and sound continued to be deeply implicated in the making of a polity, whose right to govern was based on the relationship between emotion and self-control.

¹ With thanks to the participants in the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, Queen's University, Belfast Seminar Series, David Hopkin and the anonymous readers for their helpful comments on this work in its various stages.

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- ⁷⁷ Beattie, *Essays*, p. 126.
- ⁷⁸ Ibid. p. 150.
- ⁷⁹ Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* (London: J. Dodsley, 1767), p. 151.
- ⁸⁰ Richard Leppert, ‘Social Order and the Domestic Consumption of Music: The Politics of Sound in the Policing of Gender Construction in Eighteenth-Century England’, in Ann

Birmingham and John Brewer (eds), *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text* (London: Routledge, 1997), pp. 514–34 (515–16).

⁸¹ Katie Barclay, ‘Singing and Lower-Class Masculinity in the Dublin Magistrate’s Court, 1800–1845’, *Journal of Social History*, 47:3 (2014), pp. 1–23.

⁸² National Archives of Ireland (NAI), CSO/RP/1821/1309 J. Carnegie, Inchera, County Cork, to Charles Grant, Chief Secretary, Dublin Castle, 1 December 1821.

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⁸⁴ NAI, CSO/RP/SC/1821/85 Copy of printed seditious ballad, ‘New Sheela na Guira’, sent to Dublin Castle, 1821.

⁸⁵ Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*.

⁸⁶ Zimmerman, *Songs of the Irish Rebellion*, pp. 36–42.

⁸⁷ William Brundage, *Under Sentence of Death: Lynching in the South* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1997), p. 236.

⁸⁸ For a discussion, see Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan, *Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2009).

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⁹⁰ Thomas Crofton Croker, *Researches in the South of Ireland: Illustrative of the Scenery* (London: John Murray, 1824), p. 329.

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⁹² NAI, CSO/RP/SC/1821/1239 Robert Rawson, Glassealy [Glassely], Athy, County Kildare, to the Chief Secretary’s Office, 13 January 1821.

⁹³ NAI, CSO/RP/SC/1821/945 Patrick R McGarrigle, Rathfriland, County Down, to William Gregory, Under Secretary, Dublin Castle, 31 March [1821]; see a very similar letter at CSO/RP/SC/1821/1304 Thomas Scott, Rathfriland, County Down, magistrate, to William Gregory, Under Secretary, Dublin Castle, 20 March 1821.

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⁹⁵ Armstrong and Trevor, *Queen v Daniel O'Connell*, p. 368.

⁹⁶ From De Latocnaye, *Ramble through Ireland, by a French Immigrant* (London), quoted in 'Art. XIII. Promenade d'un Français dans l'Irlande, &c', *Monthly Review*, 26 (1798), p. 210.

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⁹⁸ Joseph Walker, *Historical Memoirs of the Irish Bards* (London: T. Payne, 1786), p. 67.

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¹⁰² Beattie, *Essays*, p. 132; Burke, *Sublime and the Beautiful*, p. 151.

¹⁰³ Gibbons, *Edmund Burke*, p. 36.

¹⁰⁴ Johnson and Cloonan, *Dark Side*, p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Emily Cockayne, 'Cacophony, or Vile Scrapers on Vile Instruments: Bad Music in Early Modern English Towns', *Urban History*, 29:1 (2002), pp. 35–47.

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¹⁰⁷ Sean Farrell, *Rituals and Riots: Sectarian Violence and Political Culture in Ulster, 1784–1886* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2000).

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¹⁰⁹ McHale, ‘Singing and Sobriety’.