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Book Review

Paul Watt. ***Music, Morality and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain***

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Reviewed by Ross Chapman

Music and Morals, the 1871 book by English writer and cleric Hugh Reginald Haweis, attracted a wide readership: it was reprinted at least fifteen times by 1912, and translated into German in 1887. However, for contemporary readers seeking an understanding of the nineteenth-century relationship between music and morality, Haweis's brief reflections on musical affect, and much longer hagiographies of the lives of great composers, seem to prompt as many questions as they answer. Paul Watt found this to be the case too, and explores the topic much more germanely in *Music, Morality and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain*.

Expanding upon an epistemic, behavioural, and character-building framework outlined in Peter Kivy's 2009 essay 'Musical Morality,'[1] Watt's monograph surveys a diverse range of material to present insights into how social, cultural, and musical expressions could possess a 'moral force' in nineteenth-century Britain, and, by extension, the Anglosphere. An expert on nineteenth-century musical culture in Britain, whose archival findings from a fellowship at Durham University form this work's foundation, Watt scopes his study to thematically eschew headlines in the popular press,[2] as well as theoretical analyses of nineteenth-century music itself. Absent strident clamour, or potentially tenuous interpretations, what is foregrounded is a rich and practical collection of well-organised sources that shed light on music's role in expressions of morality, both in private and public spheres.

In two parts, 'Morality' and 'Social Reform' respectively, this book is structured episodically to centre on contextually oriented case studies, rather than a chronology. An effective logic is at

[1] Peter Kivy, 'Musical Morality,' in *Antithetical Arts: On the Ancient Quarrel Between Literature and Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 215–33.

[2] For example, in his study of nineteenth-century buskers in Australia, Watt notes the limits of newspaper material, 'which can be an unreliable source of information in an age of anonymity'. Paul Watt, 'Buskers and Busking in Australia in the Nineteenth Century', *Musicology Australia,* 41.1 (2019): 25.

play here. 'Morality' opens with chapters on childhood instruction and then manners, offering readers an understanding of the cultural milieu into which Britons could be enculturated. For boys, while outdoor hobbies held primacy, musical pastimes included constructing homemade instruments such as harmoniums and dulcimers, or participating in games where pretend musicians and a conductor playfully imitate an orchestra—a 'capital opportunity for making all sorts of discordant noises' (p. 23). For girls, formative musical habits were shaped by songs found in publications such as *Girl's Own Paper*, which later, for the well-heeled, could be further honed in the salon through advice found in etiquette manuals (p. 51). Yet these divisions were not always absolute: a 1906 New York publication speaks to a 'new girl', more adventurous and less concerned with conforming to restrictive gender norms and expectations (p. 47); Watt also notes that a substantial 'crossover readership' existed, for whom musical and intellectual interests overlapped.

This first section concludes with an examination of Mechanics' Institutes, whose evening classes were underscored by views espousing the 'advancement of individual and collective morality' (p. 87). The breadth of recreational activities offered under this banner is presented through a critical eye, with lofty claims tempered by pragmatic appraisals. In Launceston, for example, lectures and classes were seen as a poor fit for weary workers (of whom mechanics were only a minority), whereas chess, debating, penny readings, and concerts were more readily received (p. 89). In these analogues of modern-day community centres, in which women were often also welcome, music could be considered a frivolous amusement or a serious and improving pursuit, but functioned in either case as an 'important ingredient in the cultivation of moral sensibilities' (p. 99). From London to Leongatha, the depth of archival research presented in this chapter is striking.

Watt is a careful guide, situating his work among the wealth of literature on cultural and social expressions of morality. Moreover, any hint of a polemical tone is avoided as his discussions traverse the various 'enmeshed values' of the time, whereby social, political, economic and musical forces interacted with aesthetic pleasure and psychological wellbeing (p. 12). Class and gender divisions, for instance, are appropriately acknowledged throughout, but so too are their limitations, allowing space for source materials to speak on their own terms alongside authorial commentary. Indeed, Watt explicitly notes that he is not striving to 'celebrate, or even assume the civilising force of Western classical music upon the nineteenth-century masses' (p. 3), and such framing makes for a complex and nuanced exploration, as well as a clearer basis for future research.

In the second section, 'Social Reform', Watt's case studies assume a more personal focus. Chapter 4 examines the life and work of William Stanley Jevons (1835–1882), perhaps best-known today for his eponymous economic paradox of induced demand, whose experiences in England and Sydney rest well upon the context already established. Jevons's interest in political economy was accompanied by an abiding passion for music that Watt describes as a 'vital tonic' (p. 112), alongside his Unitarian faith. Musically, Jevons was an avid concertgoer, and spent considerable time learning the works of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Mendelssohn on harmonium, but pointedly decried the 'inane songs and senseless burlesques' of the music hall (p. 127). Alongside much personal correspondence, both Jevons's unpublished work (such as *On the Science and Arts of Music*, written during his 1855 to 1859 stay in Australia), and the posthumously released *Methods of Social Reform* (1883), help to inform the economic, musical,

and religious angles to this chapter, as well as show how Jevons's advocacy sought to influence programmes of governmental and broader societal reform.

Chapter 5 considers philanthropy, at both ends of the long nineteenth century, through the work of Hannah More (1745–1833) and Octavia Hill (1838–1912). Nineteenth-century charitable work in Britain encompassed a broad range of activities, including teaching, fundraising, and political activism, as well as almsgiving, led by 'cultural missionaries', of whom More and Hill are contrasting exemplars. As Watt rightly notes, the contexts in which More and Hill operated differed vastly: as Britain's place in the world evolved, so too did its cultural mores, and the rise of a more outward-facing culture—certainly much less Francophobe—saw music play a more active and influential role. The musical activities of the London-based Kyrle Society led by Hill were 'tremendously busy' (p. 152), and reflective of a globalising world, with branches opening not only across England, but also Berlin and Philadelphia. Watt concludes these case studies with a critical reflection on paternalism (that is also spoken to in Chapter 3), and includes some amusing criticism garnered by the Kyrle Society to remind us that a zeal for social reform 'was not universally applauded' (p. 154).

The case of religion, and its alternative social doctrines, is examined most closely in the final chapter, 'Utopia: Auguste Comte and Malcolm Quin.' Each of the first five chapters features utopianism of varying degrees, and in a similar vein the positivist movement inspired by Comte (1798–1857) was one of nineteenth-century France's rational 'foundations for cultivating knowledge and a moral life' (p. 160) as an alternative to Christianity, while nonetheless drawing from its wellspring. Here, knowledge was understood to pass sequentially through a three-stage, theological-metaphysical-positive process, paraphrased by humanist Richard Congreve as 'space-earth-humanity' (p. 161). Quin (1854–1945) established a positivist church in Newcastle-upon-Tyne in 1878, and for his congregations saw music as essential: fascinated by (largely Christian) liturgical practices, he wrote the text to some seventy hymns. The themes of these texts, and the cultural dynamics surrounding their performance, are analysed by Watt to return the discussion of music as a 'moral force' to the initial frames of Haweis and Kivy from the Introduction.

As Watt proves, music played a multi-faceted role in the promotion of morality in Anglophone nineteenth-century societies, akin, perhaps, to tendrils from climbing plants, rising from a fertile and surprisingly heterogenous seedbed. From a systematic perspective, how (or indeed whether) these seeds and shoots helped shape the Australian introduction of compulsory education—Victoria's Education Act of 1872 being introduced only shortly after England's 1870 Elementary Education Act—is one potential line of inquiry, recently explored in a British context by Rosemary Golding,[3] that could build upon the wealth of contexts and perspectives established here.

Altogether, *Music, Morality and Social Reform in Nineteenth-Century Britain* succeeds in presenting an original, sensitive, and nuanced elucidation of the complex relationships between music and ideas of morality, and how they functioned as part of a broader sweep of nineteenth-century social development. Watt's work hints at numerous possible avenues for future research, and, for a contemporary world in which the value of music remains contested,

[3] Rosemary Golding, 'Music and Mass Education: Cultivation or Control?' in *Music and Victorian Liberalism: Composing the Liberal Subject*, edited by Sarah Collins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 60–80.

these historical case studies stand as proof of how music met a range of individual and collective needs in a time of profound, occasionally dizzying change.

About the Author
Ross Chapman teaches music history at the University of Melbourne, and intercultural communication at Deakin University. His 2023 PhD charted the untold early history of the saxophone in Australia, and his current research focuses on notions of cultural value and musical exchange, advancing Australian connections to international musical developments of the long nineteenth century and beyond.