Music and Politics in Britain, c.1780–c.1850
King’s College London, 2–3 June 2017
Call for Papers

Music was everywhere in early nineteenth-century British politics. Coronations, commemorations, marches, protests, dinners, toasts, rallies, riots, festivals, dances, fundraisers, workplaces, streets—all hummed to the sounds of music. It provided anthems for anointing and songs for sedition, rhythms for rituals and ballads for ballots, chants for charters and melodies for militaries. In all these spaces, media, and fora, radicals, reformers, loyalists, and Conservatives all competed for the best tunes. And they did so because of their belief in music’s capacity to affect its listeners—to arouse joy and indignation, sadness and sympathy, merriment, mischief, and mirth—and its ability to bind participants together in new visions of community, nation, and identity.

Yet, for all its omnipresence, music often struggles to be heard in the dusty silence of the archive. Music’s evanescence and impermanence defies established, text-based methods of historical enquiry. Indeed, most historical analysis of music and political culture has focused exclusively on song lyrics. We need a much broader frame of analysis to understand how music connects to the political. Music, text (if present), and the circumstances and social dynamics of performance, all combine to generate a range of meanings for those taking part—one person’s pleasant entertainment might be another’s call for revolution, and for some, both at once. This multiplicity of meanings projected by musical performance is at once challenging and beguiling, precisely for the ways in which it variously circumvents, contradicts, reinforces, or interweaves with the textual elements of political discourse. Bringing music to the centre of analysis has rich potential to offer fresh insight into political traditions, symbols, divisions, and struggles. An explicit aim of this conference is to facilitate this by promoting a deeper interdisciplinary exchange between historians, musicologists, and scholars of visual, literary, and theatrical culture.

To these ends, we invite proposals for papers from scholars in any discipline that address the role of music in political culture in late eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain. Chronological boundaries are flexibly conceived, and proposals for papers which address earlier and later periods but which overlap with 1780–1850 are welcome.
The conference will consist of a series of roundtable discussions among all participants of pre-circulated papers. Papers will be circulated by 12 May 2017. Once revised, these will form the basis of a collection of essays on the intersection of music and political culture in this period. The conference is supported by the EFC-funded project ‘Music in London, 1800–1851’ led by Professor Roger Parker. There is no registration fee, accommodation and dinner will be provided, and travel costs will be reimbursed where possible.

Abstracts (max. 500 words) for 5,000 word papers should be sent, with a short biography, to david.kennerley@history.ox.ac.uk by 1 June 2016.

For more information please contact the organisers, Drs David Kennerley (Oxford) and Oskar Cox Jensen (King’s College London) at david.kennerley@history.ox.ac.uk or oskar.cox_jensen@kcl.ac.uk.

Potential themes for papers include:

- The politics of opera, theatre, melodrama, and concert music
- Political movements and musical creativity
- Gender, race, participation, and exclusion
- Four nations’ archipelagic perspectives
- Occasion and commemoration
- Music and the politics of space
- Communities and sociability
- Political songs and melodies
- Bands, choirs, ensembles
- The politics of dance
- Class and citizenship
- State/official music
- Music on trial
- Nationalism
- Pedagogy
- Empire
- Labour