

Maria Semi

Paper prepared for the International conference *Sound and Sense in Britain, 1770-1840*

A revised version will be published in a volume of collected essays.

“LISTEN LOCAL, ACT GLOBAL”:
BECOMING INTERESTED IN AND PAYING ATTENTION TO (INTER)NATIONAL SOUNDS IN THE
EIGHTEENTH CENTURY.

Sound, regarded as a scientific object, is measurable and quantifiable, and exists independently of cultural parameters in the form of vibrations. Hearing sounds and speaking or writing about them, however, is a completely different matter. In the words of Jonathan Sterne “[...] human beings reside at the center of any meaningful definition of sound. [...] As part of a larger physical phenomenon of vibration, sound is a product of the human senses and not a thing in the world apart from humans. Sound is a little piece of the vibrating world”.¹ But if sound is a product of the human senses, once the wave becomes a sensation, from simply being a ‘sound’ it can become ‘music’ or ‘noise’, and even its being at all ‘heard’ or not are phenomena largely dependent not merely on the senses, but also on culture, habit and environmental conditions. When flying, after a while we become oblivious to the constant and loud sound made by the aircraft: as we are immersed in that sound we do not pay attention to it anymore, it ‘vanishes’ from our perception usually until the engine stops, and suddenly we realise *ex-post* that we have been constantly surrounded by noise.

As sound waves do not leave traces, to know about their past we need to rely on secondary, mainly written, sources. That means that what people heard, what they attended to, what they were interested in, matters to us because their interest and attention operated as filters for the objectivity of sound (there whether you want it or not) to the subjectivity of perception. Each and every one of the people from the past who wrote about their sound experiences, lived in their own aircraft: they paid attention to certain sounds, and not to others.

Like many other phenomena, different local soundscapes have always existed in various parts of the world. But it is not until this sonic diversity, especially when tainted with national flavours, began to interest its perceivers that it became an object of investigation in itself. The quest for universal values in the eighteenth-century, its need to define mankind as a whole as comprised of fixed characteristics — and, of course, to draw boundaries between who was and was not included— made it even more urgent to tackle the issue of both human diversity and national specificities. Sound was no exception. Phenomena like musical exoticism,² the birth of collections of national airs, “aural tourism”, are all rooted in a cultural context that oscillated between universalism and particularism. Indeed, we could venture to say that some of these features foreshadow more contemporary discussions about the tension between globalisation and local phenomena. Collecting national airs, one of the main topics to be

Writing this paper was possible thanks to a Marie Skłodowska-Curie co-founding programme of the European Union. It was written for the International conference *Sound and Sense in Britain, 1770-1840* organised by James Grande and Carmel Raz at the Heyman Center in 2017. I am immensely grateful to James Chandler for his comments on an earlier version of the manuscript.

¹ Jonathan Sterne, *The Audible Past. Cultural Origins of Sound Reproduction* (Duke University Press, 2003), 11.

² A subject of studies that has been thoroughly enquired especially by authors such as Ralph Locke (*Musical Exoticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009; *Music and the Exotic from the Reinassance to Mozart*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016; ‘Aida and Nine Readings of Empire’, *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 3 (2006): 45-72, and many other articles); Jonathan Bellman (*The Exotic in Western Music*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1998; *The Style Hongrois in the Music of Western Europe*, Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1993); Bennet Zon (*Representing Non-Western Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain*, Rochester – New York: University of Rochester Press, 2007; *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire, 1780s-1940s*, edited with Martin Clayton, Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007); Matthew Head (*Orientalism, Masquerade and Mozart’s Turkish Music*, Ashgate, 2000; ‘Musicology on Safari: Orientalism and the Spectre of Postcolonial Theory’, *Music Analysis*, 22, 2003: 211-230).

discussed in this chapter, means bringing a local phenomenon into the global world through print and/or performance: in the eighteenth century Scottish songs overwhelmingly made their way to the continent, songs from India made their way to Britain, a few specimens of national songs from around the world were included in Rousseau's *Dictionnaire de musique* tables, and Jean-Benjamin de Laborde in his 1780 *Essai sur la musique ancienne et moderne* thought it wise to dedicate the whole of its fourth book to the 'Chansons', with special sections ranging from Gaelic songs to Chinese ones. Roland Robertson significantly sees globality not as the product of modernity, but rather as "the general condition which has *facilitated* the diffusion of 'general modernity', globality at this point being viewed in terms of the interpenetration of geographically distinct 'civilizations'"³. Song collections in the eighteenth century in a certain way comply with what Robertson sees as a micromarketing (or glocal) strategy that can be labelled as: "diversity sells",⁴ but their trajectory somehow reverses the motto of glocal phenomena ("Think global, act local") into "think (or 'listen', in our case) local, act global". In a recent article Catherine Mayes states that "it was precisely during the decades around 1800 that the recognition and celebration of music as nation-defining flourished alongside detailed discussions of the essential characteristics of various national musics in contemporary writings. Yet the emerging importance of music to national identity at this time appears to be quite at odds with generic representations [...]"⁵. Her point, discussed also by Bellman and Locke in their studies on musical exoticism, is that representations of the Other's music (in Mayes' article the "other" is Eastern Europe) are not accurate in their choice of the musical material and language. They just hint at something that audiences could experience as 'exotic', but they always 'tame' the music of the others making it 'harmless' to western Europeans's ears.⁶ However one might wonder if that isn't true of any form of broad representation of the Other, especially when it needs to sell. The case of tunes publication in Scottish song collections, discussed later in this chapter, will moreover show that tampering with musical 'authenticity' was a practice common even when this national music was one's own. We could therefore reformulate Robertson's catch phrase like this: "*tailored* diversity sells".

This chapter examines the growing awareness of the "national properties" of sounds in the eighteenth century, mainly from a British – and more specifically Scottish – perspective, and focusses especially on phenomena such as the collection of national airs, and the ballad revival (but 'street cries' could have been an equally suitable example). In this history Britain holds a peculiar place. After the Act of Union of 1707 British national identity was forged (a process that took over a hundred years), and "Britishness" had to be somehow invented.⁷ Sounds and music played their part in this process of invented tradition and cultural definition.⁸

As demonstrated by Matthew Gelbart, it was Scotland that 'lay at the heart of the first discussions in English of "national music"',⁹ and it is therefore to Scotland that we will turn most of our attention.

We will begin by tuning our discourse to some key eighteenth-century discussions, such as the Humean reflections about "national characters" and the Scottish "conjectural history" tradition, because they provide useful intellectual tools in order to better understand the second part of this chapter, we

³ Roland Robertson, "Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity", in *Global Modernities*, ed. M. Featherstone, S. Lash & R. Robertson (London: SAGE, 1995), 25-44: 27.

⁴ Ibidem, p. 29.

⁵ Catherine Mayes, "Eastern European National Music as Concept and Commodity at the Turn of the Nineteenth Century", *Music & Letters* 95, no.1 (2014): 70.

⁶ Nicholas Cook speaks of practices that "by the end of the nineteenth century, had congealed into a musical lexicon of alterity (modality, pentatonic/gapped scales, parallel fourths/fifths, augmented seconds, and so on) as perfectly adapted to add decorative colour without impacting on the thoroughly Western structure beneath", in "Encountering the Other, redefining the self: Hindostannie airs, Haydn's folksong settings, and the 'common practice' style", in *Music and Orientalism in the British Empire*, 14.

⁷ Standard reference here is to Linda Colley's seminal *Britons: forging the Nation, 1707-1837* (Yale University Press, 1992).

⁸ An example of the fruitfulness of such an approach in the French context can be found in Laura Mason's *Singing the French Revolution. Popular Culture and Politics, 1787-1799* (Ithaca – London: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁹ Matthew Gelbart, *The Invention of "Folk music" and "Art music"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11.

will then turn our attention to phenomena like the ballad revival and the birth of the concept of ‘oral culture’. What I wish to show is that many phenomena which are usually separately treated in academic writing share common roots, and that trying to retrace those roots helps us understand how aural practices and experiences – such as listening to ballads – could change their meaning and significance across (even a small amount of) time and how pieces of the ‘vibrating world’ can start resonating more powerfully because of a change of perspective. None of the single details I discuss here may be new, but I hope the way of presenting them will lead to new thinking.

1. *Epistemology, Judgment, and Taste*

The study of the sense of hearing has been part of a larger change in eighteenth century *episteme*: already at the end of the seventeenth century the foundations for a new way of intending the relationship between the senses, the ‘outer world’ and human modes of perception were laid. The discussions unleashed by the well-known ‘Molyneux problem’ (would a person born blind and accustomed to recognise objects like a sphere or a cube by touch recognise them only by sight if surgery gave this person the chance to see?) led many prominent philosophers to investigate the way in which sensations and ideas are generated. Another question to be discussed was the relationship between the objects (as they exist independently of our perception) and our way of “processing” them, by way of our senses and understanding.

The relationship between sounds and hearing was often described and investigated in philosophical treatises about the beautiful and the arts, in medical treatises and in musical treatises. A typical *crux* in these discussions arose when the difference among *tastes* was mentioned. If mankind was supposed to share the same mental faculties and body senses,¹⁰ how could one justify the undeniable multiplicity of taste?

In the first half of the Eighteenth century the common answer to the problem on the British soil was that, although we are born as *tabula rasa* and are endowed with the same mental faculties, habits and associations influence the way we experience things and therefore generate the manifold individual preferences in matters of taste, just as climate acts upon the passions that characterise each and every nation. A tension between the undeniable individuality of taste and the need for the existence of a standard of taste is everywhere felt in the Eighteenth-century.¹¹ Approaching the end of his essay on the *Standard of taste*, Hume admits that: “Notwithstanding all our endeavours to fix a standard of taste, and reconcile the discordant apprehensions of men, there still remain two sources of variation. [...] The one is the different humours of particular men; the other, the particular manners and opinions of our age and country”.¹² The manners of the country, and especially its form of government, are key features for Hume as he maintains that the development of culture and of the arts require specific political conditions. Only once a country has got a form of government granted by laws, can the arts and sciences develop. In his essay *The Sceptic* Hume goes back to the problem of the multiplicity of tastes:

“[...] nature is more uniform in the sentiments of the mind than in most feelings of the body, and produces a nearer resemblance in the inward than in the outward part of human kind. There is something approaching to principles in mental taste; and critics can reason and dispute much more plausibly than cooks or perfumers. We may observe, however, That this uniformity among human kind, hinders not, but that there is a considerable diversity in the sentiments of beauty and worth, and that education, custom, prejudice, caprice, and

¹⁰ Although we have to stress that more than often ‘mankind’ actually referred to propertied, white men.

¹¹ It is not a hazard that this kind of tension is felt also in the domain of morals, as the realms of aesthetics (ante-litteram) and morals were strictly connected and shared many core-questions as the one we are here discussing: the problem of diversity (on moral diversity in the British tradition of thought see Daniel Carey, *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson. Contesting Diversity in the Enlightenment and Beyond* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005)).

¹² David Hume, *Essay on the Standard of Taste*, in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987, 243)

humour frequently vary our taste of this kind. You will never convince a man, who is not accustomed to ITALIAN music, and has not an ear to follow its intricacies, that a SCOTCH tune is not preferable".¹³

Here Hume seems to state that Italian music, according to the standard of taste, should be preferred to "Scotch tunes" (notice the shift from the word 'music', which refers to the art, to the humbler word 'tune'), but if one's ear has not been previously accustomed (educated) to it, this music will sound too 'intricate' and therefore it will not be a source of pleasure. As the word itself (taste) suggests, from seventeenth and early eighteenth century discussions about beauty to mid-century discussions about taste, there is a transition from an 'outer objectivity' (of beauty) to an inner human subjectivity, that judges by the sensations and sentiments that objects of different kind generate in us.

What I wish to argue here is that little by little in the eighteenth century not only did the world of sensation become, as commonly acknowledged, a crucial element in 'matters of taste', but taste itself acquired a prominent historical and cultural dimension. Being a process which implied becoming aware of the power of national customs, this way of looking at what we nowadays call 'culture' is linked to the new weight historical studies assumed in that century, to the discussions engendered by ideas on the development of civilization and to the extensive reading of travel literature. These topics contributed to the birth of the concept of "national musics", which flourished in the British (and especially Scottish) context, and gave much food for thought on the German soil. In Hume's remarks is implicit the idea that the refinement of musical taste brought by civilization implies the transition from simple (and therefore more 'natural') tunes to complex (which usually meant Italian and especially polyphonic) music. These are very common assumptions. Linked to this idea there was the assumption that the diversification of tastes and cultures occurred especially in later historical stages, whereas the 'state of nature' must have been the same for the whole of mankind.¹⁴ In this context, Hume's theories developed in his *Essay on national characters* were deeply influential, as well as was the reception of Rousseau's ideas. To sum it up with Silvia Sebastiani:

In ordering human societies on a continuum from savagery to civilization, diversity—of tasks and occupations, as well as characters—became a specific product of history [...]. Nation gradually became a historical and cultural category, reserved to describe the political and social divisions of Europe: it came to be associated with a heritage of social customs and beliefs, linked to a political unit, which shapes the cultural variety of more advanced peoples. It is in the eighteenth century, then, that nations acquired the sense of linguistic and cultural communities, of "imagined communities", as Benedict Anderson labels them.¹⁵

This typically British—and even more Scottish—way of interpreting history, articulating it as a succession of stages gained its own name: conjectural history. Dugald Stewart retrospectively described it as a history arising out of comparisons between: "our intellectual acquirements, our opinions, manners, institutions, [and] those which prevail among rude tribes".¹⁶ These comparisons bringing us to ask "by what gradual steps the transition has been made from the first simple efforts of uncultivated nature, to a state of things so wonderfully artificial and complicated". This new approach to history—inaugurated

¹³ David Hume, *The Skeptic*, in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987, 163)

¹⁴ Carey observes too that encapsulating diversity in a historical dynamic has been a peculiar way in which the Scottish Enlightenment tried to deal with it: "The strategy that eventually gained favour among Scottish writers was to recast difference as a product of history, conditioned by varying economic and social situations", *Locke, Shaftesbury, and Hutcheson*, 188.

¹⁵ Silvia Sebastiani, "National Characters and Race: A Scottish Enlightenment Debate", in *Character, Self, and Sociability in the Scottish Enlightenment*, ed. Thomas Ahnert and Susan Manning (New York: Palgrave – MacMillan, 2011), 187-205: 188-189. See also: S. Sebastiani, "Race and National Characters in Eighteenth-Century Scotland: the Polygenetic Discourses of Kames and Pinkerton", *Cromohs* 8 (2003), <http://www.fupress.net/index.php/cromohs/article/view/15686/14577>.

¹⁶ Dugald Stewart, *An Account of the Life and Writings of Adam Smith* prefixed to Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (new York: 1966), xli-xlii.

by Adam Smith's *Lectures on Jurisprudence* delivered at Glasgow University (1763)¹⁷—had its impact on discussions about music: it modified the way in which the classical topic of the 'music of the Ancients' was discussed, and it brought to what Matthew Gelbart calls the 'anthropologizing of music'. The ancient Greeks became a primitive Other, comparable to the newly discovered tribes of the South Seas. But also the neighbouring Highlanders became a primitive Other, to be observed in order to fill in the gaps in stadial histories not by way of conjecture, but by means of empirical observation. In a certain way geographical distances shrank as comparisons made under the mere chronological axis were made possible. These variously labelled Others were supposed to be testimonies of the 'infancy of mankind', of the initial stage of civilization and, therefore, of being more near to the 'real nature' of humankind. We need to be aware, too, that this propinquity to nature did not have the same value at the beginning and at the end of the century, when Scottish philosophy blossomed and Rousseau's ideas about civilization, linked to considerations about the sublimity of ancient languages, travel literature, and to the interest in national past made primitivism a fashionable trend. Moreover we have to acknowledge that if in general we can say that "primitivists sought out and privileged those societies in which they could perceive the qualities of natural men", it is also true that "the motivation for such an engagement, and the sort of locations in which natural man was to be found, differed from individual to individual across Europe and through the course of the century"¹⁸.

One of the questions related to music when it came to analysing the characteristics of man in the 'natural state' or in the infancy of civilisation was what kind of music would such a man like. Hume, we saw, claimed that a man not accustomed to the intricacies of Italian music would for sure prefer a "Scotch tune", for in Britain it was the tunes of the Scottish Highlands and Lowlands which were associated with the idea of "naturalness". Whereas in the context, for example, of the opposition between Italian and French music along rousseauian lines, where Italian music stood for 'natural' and French music stood for 'artificial', it was Italian music which was supposed to please to an impartial and uneducated audience. Primitivists had their (refined) foes, they therefore looked for sources of 'pure naturalness' that were built in contrast to them. Rousseau fought his battle against French music, grounding it especially on his examination of the specific musical properties of national languages, which acted powerfully on their 'potential for melody'¹⁹. In Britain the musical foe was especially Italian music, symbol of luxury and of 'effeminate refinement': in Fergusson's poem 'On the Death of Scottish Music' the author decries how Italian 'sounds' have supplanted Scottish 'soft-tongu'd melody'.²⁰ The general idea, made popular by Rousseau, was that it was *simple* melody that stood at the roots of what was 'natural', and therefore universal, in music. In the words of Gelbart:

[Rousseau's] search for simplicity and for supposed natural qualities in music, tied to his theorizations about its history, exerted a mighty influence on a generation of scholars who were seeking to trace the common roots of humanity and uncover the universals of human nature buried beneath the veneer of modern civilization [...]. The claims of musical universalism, previously (as in Rameau's theory) based on the idea that music reflected a broad natural order turned into the idea that music was natural to men in that it stood at the origins of language.²¹

¹⁷ See Nicholas Phillipson, *Adam Smith: an Enlightened Life* (Penguin, 2010), chap. 5.

¹⁸ Dafydd Moore, "The Ossianic Revival, James Beattie and Primitivism", in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, vol. II, ed. by Ian Brown, Thomas Owen Clancy, Susan Manning, Murray Pittock (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 90-104: 91.

¹⁹ "C'est de la mélodie seulement qu'il faut tirer le caractère particulier d'une musique nationale, d'autant plus que ce caractère étant principalement donné par la langue, le chant proprement dit doit ressentir sa plus grande influence", Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Lettre sur la musique française*,

²⁰ "Now foreign sonnets bear the gree,/And crabbit queer variety/Of sounds fresh sprung frae Italy,/A bastard breed!/Unlike that soft-tongu'd melody/Which now lies dead", 49-54. In *Music as a Science of Mankind in Eighteenth Century Britain* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012) I have shown some of the political, nationalistic and sometimes homophobic reasons behind the criticism of Italian music.

²¹ Matthew Gelbart, "'The Language of Nature': Music as Historical Crucible for the Methodology of Folkloristics", *Ethnomusicology* 53, no. 3 (2009): 365.

Simple became thus a very meaningful and ambiguous adjective. Hume dedicated some thoughts to the subject in his essay *Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing* which opens with a quote from Addison: “Fine writing consists of sentiments, which are natural, without being obvious”. The natural and the simple, therefore, are not synonymous with poverty of expression or with obviousness: Hume endorses this view with the observation that it is not the nature of the subject that makes writing fine but the way of handling it: “if we copy low life, the strokes must be strong and remarkable, and must convey a lively image to the mind”.²² Indeed, between simplicity and refinement, Hume openly states he’d prefer the former.

This longing for ‘simplicity’ and ‘nature’ (whatever that might mean) exerted itself in many ways during the eighteenth century, but in the case of the intellectual fad we are trying to follow here, there are at least three interconnected themes that matter to our discourse: simplicity and (human) nature are usually made to ‘speak’, nature is often said to have a ‘voice’, and this voice is either identified as poetry or as sound (usually song).

Studies on orality and literacy have evidenced that in the eighteenth century, especially in Britain,²³ there was a shift in the evaluation of orality, made possible also by the fact that modern theories of language identified writing and speech as two entirely separate domains. According to Hudson, scholars “began to recognize more clearly the special powers of speech not possessed by written language, a development that led to a deeper appreciation of so-called ‘primitive’ language in non-literate societies”²⁴ and a school of thought developed (Hudson quotes especially Rousseau and Thomas Sheridan) which contended that “the propagation of literacy and print culture had destroyed the expressive force of speech, rendering it toneless and cold”.²⁵ These reflections provided a rich soil both for intellectual endeavours as the one undertaken by Macpherson, who—in the words of Mulholland—created an ‘oral voice’ for the poet’s speech,²⁶ and for a re-evaluation of popular songs. It was Scotland that lay at the heart of this new interest in the oral aspects of culture, political agenda and philosophical thought both fuelling it: “From Thomas Gray’s “The Bard” (1757) to Macpherson’s Ossian poems to the proliferating editions of ballad collections like Thomas Percy’s *Reliques of Ancient English Poetry* (1765), eighteenth-century Britain saw a remarkable upswell of interest in ancient bards, ancient poetry, and a newly compelling vernacular antiquity”.²⁷ What I want to stress here—which recalls our aircraft scenario for sound rendered conscious or unconscious—is that elements of the British soundscape that had been present for a long time, such as ballads and songs, suddenly come to the fore as they become a valuable element of the *culturally framed* soundscape. Ballads and oral culture were not a popular subject of polite learning before the eighteenth century and McDowell has recently shown that “even as antiquarians, protofolklorists, poets, and others valorized certain kinds of oral tradition that they viewed as quaint and harmless, literate hostilities toward other kinds of oral tradition did not change”.²⁸ But as ballads acquired a new cultural meaning, in view of their participation to the quest for origins and the making of national character, collective attention focussed on them: from ‘being there’ passively, they became an active element in contemporary soundscape. And when I use the term ‘collective’ I am explicitly not referring

²² David Hume, *Of Simplicity and Refinement in Writing*, in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1987), 191.

²³ *The Spoken Word. Oral Culture in Britain, 1500-1850*, ed. Adam Fox and Daniel Woolf (Manchester – New York: Manchester University Press, 2002), esp. chap. 8, “Constructing oral tradition: the origins of the concept in Enlightenment intellectual culture” by Nicholas Hudson: 240-255.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 242

²⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 246

²⁶ See James Mulholland, “James Macpherson’s Ossian Poems, Oral Traditions, and the Invention of Voice”, *Oral Tradition* 24, no. 2 (2009): 393-414.

²⁷ Maureen N. McLane – Laura M. Slatkin, “British Romantic Homer: Oral Tradition, “primitive Poetry” and the Emergence of Comparative Poetics in Britain, 1760-1830”, *ELH* 78, no. 3 (2011): 690. See also Leith Davis and Maureen N. McLane, ‘Orality and Public Poetry’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature*, 125-132 and Maureen N. McLane, *Balladeering, Minstrelsy, and the Making of British Romantic Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

²⁸ Paula McDowell, *The Invention of the Oral. Print Commerce and Fugitive Voices in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017) 16.

to the only learned world. Because if ballad collecting has been practiced by several armchair scholars, it is also true that others did real fieldwork,²⁹ and—as stressed by McAuley—“for every collector who published a collection, there were other individuals who provided songs, airs, background information, or an entrée into the communities whose repertoires were being collected. These individuals tend to go unmentioned, seldom appearing anywhere [...]”³⁰. And it is not unlikely to think that receiving the visit of, say, a Walter Scott who joins you by a remote fireplace somewhere in Scotland to listen to you or your old mother’s singing, might make you wonder about why your songs are so interesting. Being visited by song collectors will change also one’s own perspective on this singing activity and will more easily make people aware that these songs have become an ‘oral tradition’³¹ they are bearing as well as embodying.

The point of the foregoing is to show that this new way of approaching culture influenced the way aural products of culture, as poetry and song, were perceived. Theories of perception, conjectural history, primitivism, theories of language, interest in national origins, all concurred to make ballads and songs powerful means of conscious and deliberate national characterisation. What is of interest here to the historian looking for forgotten soundscapes and who reasons about the relationship between sound and (making) sense is that the broadly-shared and sustained attention focussed on the ballad tradition (and the fear and foreboding of its extinction) modified the way ballads and songs were integrated into polite discourse, and in turn this also modified (and selected) the production and consumption of these popular genres.

2. *Scottish songs: from streets and performance to collection and history.*

We have pointed to the fact that simplicity had become a particularly meaningful term in the eighteenth century, a term that was usually heralded by the opponents to the new rhetoric of the supporters of the civilizing powers of luxury.³² Poetry and music were closely connected to the ideas of simplicity and nature through the medium of ‘song’, as songs, together with language, seemed to be elements shared by all human communities: as the century progressed and the interest into pristine conditions of humankind raised, the discussions about (national) songs became a suitable topic for polite conversation. The music historian Charles Burney in his writings offers many examples of this new interest, but the one that follows is indeed one of the most interesting. It is related in his travelogue *The Present State of Music in Germany*³³ and its object is an encounter in 1771 with Lord Marischal (George Keith, c.1693-1778), an exiled Jacobite:

as to music, he said, that I was unfortunate in being addressed to him, for he was such a Goth, as neither to know any thing of it, nor to like any music, but that of his own country bagpipes. On this occasion, he was very pleasant upon himself: here ensued a discussion of Scots music, and Erse poetry; after which, his lordship said, “but lest you should think me too insensible to the power of sound, I must tell you, that I have made a collection of *national tunes* of almost all the countries on the globe, which I believe I can shew you”. After a search, made by himself, the book was found, and I was made to sing the whole collection through, without an instrument; during which time, he had an anecdote for every tune. When I had done, his lordship kindly wrote down a list of all such tunes

²⁹ Think of the McDonald brothers’ collection *Highland Vocal Airs*, or later of Alexander Campbell who set out on a tour to his own home-country, Scotland, in 1815 founded by the *Highland Society of Scotland* to document his native music. His mission was to: “collect unknown tunes and give them without improvement or alienation [...] record any historical notes connected with the tune, [...] note the location, informant and instrument upon which a tune was heard; and record the words that went with it” in Karen McAuley, *Our Ancient National Airs: Scottish Song Collecting c. 1760-1888* (PhD thesis, University of Glasgow): 101

³⁰ McAuley, *Our Ancient National Airs*, 35.

³¹ A link between ballads and ‘oral tradition’ was explicitly made by John Pinkerton, in his *Dissertation on the Oral Tradition of Poetry*, which is the preface to his own collection *Scottish Tragic Ballads* (1781).

³² On the luxury debate in the eighteenth century, see the monograph *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century. Debates, Desires, and Delectable Goods*, ed. by M. Berg and E. Eger (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).

³³ Charles Burney, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands, and United Provinces*, vol. II (London, Becket, Robson and Robinson, 1773): 121-122.

as had pleased me most by their oddity and originality, of which he promised me copies, and then ordered a Scots piper, one of his domestics, to play to me some Spanish and Scots tunes, which were not in the collection; “but play them in the garden, says he, for these fine Italianised folks cannot bear our rude music near their delicate ears.”

This episode is telling in many ways. National songs are here the object of polite conversation, but Lord Marischal seems to proceed cautiously, in order to see if his interlocutor, being “Italianised”, considers the topic worthy. Clearly finding a fertile soil, the two men proceed to discuss the effects of music upon untutored ears: episodes relating to a Tahitian visitor to Paris’ Opera, to a Greek lady experiencing French and Italian Opera for the first time, Scottish tunes and the *ranç-des-vaches* follow each other. All these topics were related to the idea of an Other nearer to Nature, as well as to the new taste for the picturesque. As noted by Ian Woodfield:

Majestic scenery and extraordinary natural phenomena such as the Giant’s causeway in County Arnim were beginning to attract widespread attention. Unfamiliar cultures (including some like the Irish that had hitherto been treated with scorn) were increasingly perceived as fruitful sources of exotic experience. Even barbarity, when viewed by the inquisitive traveller from a safe distance, could produce a kind of vicarious thrill. The most important musical expression of this movement came with the rapid growth of interest in ‘national airs’.³⁴

It is interesting to note that some of the nobleman and diplomats encountered by Burney in his tour around Germany told him they had made their own collections of national tunes (as we have read in the quote above, but there are several other examples), and Burney himself often asked his occasional informants to acquaint him with specimens of national music.³⁵

The interest for these song collections did not only come from “inquisitive travellers” looking for exotic experiences, but also from people interested in culturally defining their own national origins, as in the eighteenth century modern cultural identity came to be defined also by sounds and music.³⁶ John Lettice in his *Letters on a Tour Through Various Parts of Scotland* published in 1792, criticizing the attitude of some Englishmen touring Scotland, wrote “We are all Britons from the land’s end to the Orkneys [...]; and God forbid that *names or sounds*, affectation, illiberality or prejudice should prevent the natives of Kirkwall and Penzance from regarding each other, as Britons and fellow citizens.”³⁷ In the eighteenth century “names and sounds” concur to the creation of a shared national identity, and recognizing (and accepting) some diversity in the articulations of sounds—for here Lettice is primarily referring to language and accents—across the nation is necessary in order to build a shared British identity.³⁸

In 1741 William Hogarth published the engraving *The enraged musician* which cunningly represents London’s streets soundscape.

³⁴ Ian Woodfield, *Music of the Raj. A Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth Century Anglo-Indian Society* (Oxford – New York: Oxford University Press, 2000): 151.

³⁵ A notable example being the encounter with Schubart, which ended with a performance of ‘national music’: “[Schubart] was the first real great harpsichord player that I had hitherto met with in Germany, as well as the first who seemed to think the object of my journey was, in some measure, a national concern. [...] In the evening, he had the attention to collect together, at his house, three or four boors, in order to let me hear them play and sing *national music*, concerning which, I had expressed great curiosity”, *Present State...*, 105-8.

³⁶ An early witness of the imminent cultural change in the value attributed the songs as nation-defining is reported by Ruth Perry: “Lord Seafield, Scotland’s last lord chancellor, used a telling figure of speech to define what was being lost in the union with England and the disbanding of the Scottish parliament [i.e. after the Act of Union]. It was, he said nostalgically with a touch of bitterness, “the end of an auld sang.” Ballads and songs had begun to represent some intangible but essential Scottishness”, in ““The Finest Ballads”: Women’s Oral Traditions in Eighteenth-Century Scotland”, *Eighteenth-Century Life* 32, no. 2 (Spring 2008): 85.

³⁷ Quoted in Katherine Haldane Grenier *Tourism and Identity in Scotland, 1770-1914* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005): 15.

³⁸ About the ‘language debate’ in Scotland, see Charles Jones and Wilson McLeod, ‘Standards and Differences: Languages in Scotland, 1707-1918’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature* : 21-32. I owe to James Chandler the reference to Robert Crawford, *Devolving English Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).



Figura 1 <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hogarth-the-enraged-musician-t01800>

As noted by Sean Shesgreen,³⁹ in designing this print Hogarth wanted to set his figures in a well denoted, realistic London scenery. So well did Hogarth succeed in his visual rendering of noise to make Henry Fielding state that this print “is enough to make a man deaf to look at”.⁴⁰ Among the purveyors of vocal mayhem we find a woman singing the ballad *The Lady’s Fall* with a baby in her arms.⁴¹ Ballad singers were common inhabitants of London’s streets “forming circles at every corner”, as Georg Lichtenberg has it in 1770, sketching an evening stroll in the streets of London.⁴² As Paula McDowell has stressed:

the importance of oral public discourse to popular political culture in London can scarcely be overestimated. If ordinary Londoners could conceivably avoid sermons, they could scarcely avoid the conversations, arguments, and oral advertising of the coffee-house, marketplace, or street. And for the illiterate majority in England, these

³⁹ Sean Shesgreen, *Images of the Outcast: The Urban Poor in the Cries of London* (Rutgers University Press, 2002): 102-113.

⁴⁰ Henry Fielding, *Journal of a Voyage to Lisbon* (printed for A. Millar, 1755): 45 (quoted in Shesgreen: 102-3).

⁴¹ For a study of this figure and her song see T. Fulford....

⁴² *Lichtenberg’s Visits to England*, ed. Margaret L. Mare and W. H. Quarrell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1938): 63-65 (quoted in Robert Brink Shoemaker, *The London Mob: Violence and Disorder in Eighteenth-century England* (London – New York: Hambledon and London, 2004), 2.

modes of communication were in fact the most regular source of news. While printed texts could be confiscated and censored, however, oral political culture was almost impossible to control.⁴³

Ballad singing, an example of oral political culture discussed by McDowell, was a typical women activity, ranging from the London streets ballad hawkers,⁴⁴ to field labourers, and middle-class and aristocratic ladies: all those people sang in different places, for different occasions and using different repertoires, but all contributed to framing a specific soundscape, increasingly perceived as giving a cultural shape to the unified kingdom. Also travel literature shows the pervasiveness of song culture across the Kingdom. For example both Johnson and Boswell in the travelogues of their communal journey, separately published as *Journal to the Western Islands of Scotland* (1775) and Boswell's *A Tour to the Hebrides with Samuel Johnson* (1785), pay attention to episodes involving singing (especially of Erse songs) through their tour.⁴⁵ My point is that had not ballad singing been so significant to British culture, and had not the Ossian debate occurred, probably all this vocal activity would have gone almost unnoticed by the polite world of learning: it would have been part of a taken-for-granted performative dimension of the world eighteenth-century Britons were living in, no more worthy of attention than those actions we see performed by hostesses and stewards during our flights.

Dignified in Addison's *Spectator* numbers 70, 74 and 80 as emblems of "Perfection of Simplicity of Thought", and "Paintings of Nature" ballads "were not just sung from memory in the convivial setting of cottage fireside, but were also sold in the mean streets as the cheap goods of destitute beggars",⁴⁶ being a literary genre enjoyed, performed and consumed by every social strata. But if Addison at the beginning of the century still felt the need to justify a literary discussion of *Chary Chase* in his *Spectator* articles by making parallels with the *Aeneid* and classical poetry, following writers did discuss the ballads without feeling the need to bother the Ancients' authority: the ballads being "the favorites of Nature's Judges—The Common People"⁴⁷ sufficed as a ground to publish new collections. Collection, Steve Newman has it

is their [the authors'] way of accessing the ballad's collectivity, a way to take advantage of the ballad's circulation as a cheap commodity while framing it so that it remains tied to a common nationality. Constituting the ballad this way, authors begin to stage moments in which an elite mind is called through an encounter with popular song to know itself and its place in the nation.⁴⁸

⁴³ Paula MacDowell, *The Women of Grub Street: Press, Politics, and Gender in the London Literary Marketplace 1678-1730* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 83. Similar remarks are expressed for the French context, although in a later period, by Laura Mason in her *Singing the Revolution*: "during the final decade of the eighteenth century, songs overleapt boundaries between politics, entertainment, and the market, to become one of the most commonly used means of communication of the French Revolution. Singing was a fluid and highly improvisational means of expression that moved easily between oral and print cultures", 2.

⁴⁴ About their activity see MacDowell, *The Women of Grub Street*, esp. pp. 58-62.

⁴⁵ Although from different points of view on the subject of the worth of music and oral culture. For a refreshing interpretation of Johnson's *Journal* see MacDowell, *The Invention of the Oral*, ...

⁴⁶ Tim Fulford, "Fallen Ladies and Cruel Mothers: Ballad Singers and Ballad Heroines in the Eighteenth Century", *The Eighteenth Century* 47, no. 2 (2006): 309.

⁴⁷ So in the words of James Johnson, in the preface to the II volume (1788) of the *Scots Musical Museum*: "Ignorance and Prejudice may perhaps affect to sneer at the simplicity of the poetry or music of some of these pieces; but their having been for ages the favorites of Nature's Judges – the Common People, was to the Editor a sufficient test of their merit", III.

⁴⁸ Steve Newman, *Ballad Collection, Lyric, and the Canon: The Call of the Popular from the Restoration to the New Criticism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007): 3. One has also, however, to be aware of the fact that this encounter of the elite mind with popular song also produced a selection in the type of popular song being admitted as worth conserving, see e.g. P. MacDowell, "'The Manufacture and Lingua-facture of Ballad-Making': Broadside Ballads in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse", *The Eighteenth Century* 47, no. 2 (2006): 151-178.

Tunes have been part of this history, and Matthew Gelbart points at Allan Ramsay as “one of the first to understand the potential of literary and musical material, and especially material shared at least partly by the lower classes, for rallying people around a common identity”.⁴⁹ Leith Davis maintains that whereas early publications of Scottish music had as focus the creation of a “homogeneous sense of British culture with London as the cosmopolitan centre to the rustic (and disembodied) Celtic peripheries”⁵⁰, later collections had a different political agenda, giving Scotland a powerful cultural role. Once the Jacobite rebellions were mere memory and British unity was under no real internal threat, underlining the nativeness and distinctiveness of Scottish music, identified in its song-culture, became a way for the periphery to establish itself as a new pivot in a larger multifocal world, with Edinburgh as one of its focuses.

With the process of collection, the history of the conversion of ballads’ speech into writing begins. As noted by Stewart:

the notion that writing endows the oral with materiality is another facet of the collector’s interest in establishing the ephemerality of the oral, an interest that puts the oral in urgent need of rescue [...] The external history of the ballad is thus inextricably bound up with the emerging notion of the ballad as artefact and the crisis in authenticity that results from the severing of this artefact from its performance context.⁵¹

Also from a musicological point of view authenticity suddenly became a crucial issue, marking a difference from the collecting practice of the first half and the second half of the century and I agree with Gelbart when he stresses that the Ossian debate accelerated a shift in the meaning of the idea of national music from that of a “popular culture shared across classes” to that of a “relic from the past, something representing an ancient and untainted stage of society, a domain in which ‘authenticity’ was central”.⁵² Ballad or song collections were not always printed with the tunes, and several notable collections (such as Ramsay’s *Tea-Table Miscellany*,⁵³ Herd’s *Ancient and Modern Scots Songs*, Pinkerton’s *Scottish Tragic Ballads* and Burns’s *Poems, Chiefly in the Scottish Dialect*, which contained five songs) contained only the name of the tune to which the lyrics ought to be sang. Davis maintains that this kind of approach “instead of positioning the author as producer and the reader as consumer” required a reader from which production was also expected, and—in so doing—these examples do “not represent a separation of oral and print cultures or of the musical and the poetic” but rather a “dynamic interaction as a challenge to conventional printed poetry”⁵⁴, thus marking a hybrid phase in the process of “endowing the oral with materiality”. In the case of these collections, the problem of authenticity related to music was completely avoided, but in the case of collections published with the tunes, authenticity became a problem which clashed especially with marketing strategies: being faithful to the ‘simplicity’ of old songs would have meant publishing only their melodic line, without adding any bass line. But educated people who wanted to revive these songs in the context of familiar and social gatherings, such as the ones represented in the familiar painting of ‘James Erskine, Lord Alva’ by David Allan (1780), needed scores which provided fully written accompaniments, especially for the pianoforte, violin or cello.

⁴⁹ M. Gelbart, “Allan Ramsay, The Idea of ‘Scottish Music’ and the beginnings of ‘National Music’ in Europe”, *Eighteenth-Century Music* 9, no. 1 (2012): 83.

⁵⁰ Leith Davis, “At “sang about”: Scottish Song and the Challenge to British Culture”, in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge University Press, 2004):

⁵¹ Susan Stewart, *Crimes of Writing. Problems in the Containment of Representation* (Oxford University Press, 1991): 104-105.

⁵² M. Gelbart, “Allan Ramsay...”: 104.

⁵³ To which eventually, three years later, Ramsay added a volume with the tunes, with simple basses by Alexander Stuart.

⁵⁴ Leith Davis, “At “sang about”: Scottish Song and the Challenge to British Culture”, in *Scotland and the Borders of Romanticism*, ed. Leith Davis, Ian Duncan and Janet Sorensen (Cambridge University Press, 2004): 196.



Figure 1 David Allan, *James Erskine, Lord Alva and his family*, 1780. National Gallery of Scotland

Davies stresses that:

notation enforced more uniformity on the songs. As Michael Chanan observes, “the development of notation has the effect of shaping musical materials to satisfy its own demands, thereby marginalizing and excluding from its syntax whatever it is unable to capture”. In addition, the songs were presented with musical accompaniment by non-traditional instruments [...] or, in many cases, lyrics were omitted completely and only the title was retained. The process of printing also changed the relationship between music, musician, and audience implicit in the original performance of Scottish songs. The local “bodily economy” of which the original songs were part was left behind, as “Scotch songs” became commodities available in shops and performed in drawing-rooms all over Britain.⁵⁵

Publications of these type were for example the ones concocted by Urbani and Corri, who - being Italians - were of course peripheral to national interests and more focussed on selling their collection, but also Thomson in his *Select Collection* presented a musical accompaniment (for violin, cello and pianoforte) that was anything but ‘original’, although in a preface to an 1805 edition of his songs he “acknowledges that such accompaniments are not universally appreciated”.⁵⁶ Ritson, with an antiquarian move, made the most radical choice, not adding any bass line to the airs. As he mentions his debt to earlier collections and to the composer and friend William Shield for the music, he takes position in the debate about authenticity, stating that:

⁵⁵ Davis, “At ‘sang about’”: 189.

⁵⁶ Claire Nelson, “Tea-table miscellanies: The Development of Scotland’s Song Culture, 1720-1800”, *Early Music*, 28/4 (2000), 613.

The base part, which seems to be considered as indispensable [*sic*] in modern musical publications, would have been altogether improper in these volumes; the Scottish tunes are pure melody, which is not unfrequently injured by the bases, which have been set to them by strangers: the only kind of harmony known to the original composers consisting perhaps in the unisonant drone of the bagpipe.⁵⁷

The issue of faithful song transcription and of tonal harmony applied to melodies not originally conceived according to that musical system start to crop up in the eighteenth century. Rousseau in the ‘Musique’ article for his *Musical Dictionary* already doubted the seeming uniformity of several specimens of ‘national music’: “On trouvera dans tous ces morceaux une conformité de Modulation avec notre Musique, qui pourra faire admirer aux uns la bonté et l’universalité de nos règles, et peut-être rendre suspecte à d’autres l’intelligence ou la fidélité de ceux qui nous ont transmis ces Airs”.⁵⁸ And William Shield, publishing the version of the *ranz-des-vaches* transcribed by Viotti (whom he names as “one of the greatest Violin Players who ever crossed the Alps”) seems even more aware of the problems of musical transcription, also in relation to rhythm, by endorsing and transcribing only this part of Viotti’s extended comment:

I have written the musick [of the *ranz-des-vaches*] without marking any rhythm or measure: there are cases in which the melody ought to be unconfined, in order that it may be completely melody and melody only. Measure would but derange its effect. These sounds are prolonged in the space through which they pass, and the time they take to fly from one mountain to another cannot be determined. It is not rhythm and measured Cadence that will give truth to the execution of this piece; it requires feeling and sentiment.⁵⁹

It is not the place here to deal with this topic at length, but it seems clear that as the problem of authenticity and originality start to be discussed in relation to music transcriptions, and as examples of music from distant lands increasingly make their way to European shores, doubts about the supposed ‘naturalness’ of Europe’s musical theory and an awareness of the link between musical theories and practices, and notational procedures start to surface.⁶⁰

The interest with ‘national songs’, which brought to the collecting of national airs, found its full intellectual legitimisation especially in the writings of Herder. Dealing with the ‘armchair scholars’ who regard popular songs as mere trifles he says:

if they could but *experience more directly with the senses*, they would acquire the potential to see with the eyes and understand with the heart. They would know that what touches the people is the most important [...]. When one removes these songs from the paper on which they appear in order to reflect on their context, their times, and the vital ways they touched real people, one gains just a bit of the sense of how they might still resonate [...]. More recently, the Scots [...] sought again to awaken their poetry through re-sounding [...]. The language, sound, and content of the old songs shape the way a people thinks, thereby leaving its mark on the nation.⁶¹

I hope that this chapter has shown how in the eighteenth century a new sensibility for the national characters of music in various parts of the world was beginning to spread its wings, and how the premises

⁵⁷ Joseph Ritson, *Scottish Songs*, London: J. Johnson and J. Egerton, 17, vii.

⁵⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Dictionnaire de Musique* (Paris : Duchesne, 1768), 317.

⁵⁹ William Shield, *An introduction to harmony* (London: 1800), 119. The original French source for Viotti’s transcription is Jean-François-Ange d’Eymar, *Anecdotes sur Viotti* (Geneva: year VIII [1799-1800]), 46.

⁶⁰ Think of Charles Burney’s observation on Chinese music, made in a letter to Raper in 1777: “It seems, from the specimens of Chinese music with which I am favoured from your French correspondent, that to reduce it to European Intervals and Measure is a very difficult task; for by its wildness in these particulars, I am convinced that it is very different – and I suppose both can only be expressed in our Characters, *à peu près*”, *The Letters of Charles Burney*, I, 1777. Also the famous case of the Hindostannie Airs, studied in particular by Jan Woodfield, provide interesting material for thinking about transcription as form of cultural appropriation. Nicholas Cook makes some very interesting remarks on the topic of musical “transcription” of the Hindostannie Airs in his chapter “Encountering the Other...”, *Music and Orientalism*, 13-37.

⁶¹ Johann Gottfried Herder, preface to *Alte Volkslieder*, translated by Philip Bohlman, *Song Loves the Masses: Herder on Music and Nationalism* (University of California Press, 2017) 27 ff.

for this cultural shift were rooted in contemporary discourses about human diversity, history, oral traditions and national origins. The interest in the origin of civilization, and in the origin of one's own culture, together with the need of distancing one's self from a common monogenetic origin from classic culture, and the new fashion for direct or mediated travel experiences helped to put into historical perspective the relationship between sounds and senses, making them a *national* phenomenon. In this process popular ballads saw a shift in the interpretation of their cultural value, and therefore their presence in the aural landscape of eighteenth-century Britain also faced significant changes. In the words of Vicesimus Knox⁶² the ballad was “rescued from the hands of the vulgar, to obtain a place in the collection of the man of taste. Verses which a few years past were thought worthy the attention of children only, are now admired for that artless simplicity which once obtained the name of coarsness and vulgarity”.

What I wished to stress in this chapter is that the process of “rescuing” (standardizing, censoring, regulating, forging) mentioned by Knox, due to a change in cultural perspective, has amplified the resounding of songs whose being-there-whether-you-want-it-or-not could have otherwise been largely underestimated. Secondly, I also wanted to show how a change in perspective could turn an element of the historical soundscape from the back- to the foreground. Ballads and songs have always been there. Enquiring collectors not.

⁶² Vicesimus Knox, *Essays Moral and Literary*, 2nd edn (London, 1779) essay 47, quoted in Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early-Modern Europe*, 5.