

## The Sound of Politics in Early Nineteenth-Century Ireland

*Katie Barclay* 

**Abstract** In the early 1800s, Jonah Barrington, an Irish judge, bemoaned that the air chosen as the march for the Irish Volunteer Movement had “no merit whatever, being neither grand, nor martial, nor animating,” contrasting it with the zeal of French revolutionary music. The emotional impact of music might be a matter of taste, but such a statement is suggestive of an aesthetics, where political music, or music used for political purposes, should have specific qualities that could be identified and judged by listeners. This article explores how people in late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Ireland identified music as political, using theories of the effects and affects of sound during the period and a corpus of Irish political music as an access point into historical experiences of musical enjoyment. While the impacts of music on the body are challenging for historians to retrieve, scholarship from the history of emotions highlights the important role of normative frameworks of emotion in accessing embodied experience. Working from this perspective, this article argues that we can begin to access the sound of politics for audiences of this period, contributing to our understanding of the role of music in political life.

In the early nineteenth century, reflecting on his youth in the 1780s, the Irish judge Jonah Barrington complained that the air chosen as the march for the Irish Volunteer Movement had “no merit whatever, being neither *grand*, nor *martial*, nor *animating*,” particularly when compared to the music of the French revolutionaries. “Though composed to excite enthusiasm in both instances,” he wrote, “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 Volunteers’ march were more calculated for a soporific than a stimulant.”<sup>1</sup>

Barrington was not alone in complaining about a lack of revolutionary fervor in Irish music. Thomas Davis, one of the key organizers of the mid-nineteenth-century nationalist Young Irelander movement, was similarly dismissive of contemporary offerings. Davis criticized the ballads of the popular “national poet” Thomas Moore, who for many was responsible for “the desire for liberty in

**Katie Barclay** is associate professor at the University of Adelaide. She thanks Oskar Cox Jensen and David Kennerley for their invitation to contribute to this special issue, and to the anonymous reviewers for their prescient observations. Please direct any correspondence to [katie.barclay@adelaide.edu.au](mailto:katie.barclay@adelaide.edu.au).

<sup>1</sup> Jonah Barrington, *Historic Memoirs of Ireland: Comprising Secret Records of the National Convention, the Rebellion, and the Union; With Delineations of the Principal Characters Connected with These Transactions*, vol. 2 (London, 1835), 176–77; italics in original.

Ireland.”<sup>2</sup> While “perfect in his expression of the softer feelings,” Moore was “often deficient in vehemence and does not speak to the sterner passions.”<sup>3</sup> *The Spirit of the Nation*, a compilation of songs written by Davis and others printed in Davis’s nationalist paper, the *Nation*, instead offered “manhood, union, and nationality” to replace “submission, hatred and provincialism.” It was music designed to overcome Moore’s “weeping” with Irish music’s “bolder strains—its raging and rejoicing.”<sup>4</sup>

One of the interesting features of Davis’s claim was that, although they employed new lyrics, he and Moore shared the same repertoire of airs, drawn from the Irish oral tradition. *The Nation* printed twenty-seven songs that shared airs with Moore, and Davis himself wrote new lyrics for ten airs that Moore also used.<sup>5</sup> The airs were not quite identical. Moore, working as a poet at a moment where adapting and “improving” historic airs for performance was still commonplace, had edited the music to support his lyrics. Davis, as part of a group of ballad collectors who placed value on a perceived “ancient” tradition, had retained an older style, which he believed was more fitting to “renew the zeal” of the Irish nation.<sup>6</sup>

It was a shift that was noticed, and the British press was vocal in its condemnation. “The poetry is of the highest order of excellence, but it is pervaded throughout by a feeling of intense hatred to England,” noted the *London Observer*; “they are fierce, ferocious, uncompromising, and dangerous in the extreme,” thought the *Naval and Military Gazette*. The conservative and unionist *Belfast Newsletter* admired the “splendid melodies” of the original airs, but it too “condemn[ed] . . . the political sentiments which they breathe.” The *Nation* proudly reprinted these reviews, alongside details of where the songbook could be purchased.<sup>7</sup> As the nationalist *Belfast Vindicator* argued, the songs shared a “singular agreement of feeling:” “They are numerous voices of one idea—all powerful, vigorous and impassioned. That one idea is Ireland.”<sup>8</sup>

Five years later, following the defeat of the Young Irelanders’ popular uprising, another reviewer in the *Nation* thought that Davis’s music had “utterly failed,” whereas, though Moore could not stir a nation to an uprising, he nonetheless captured “the choking sobs of agony; the thick warm tears of quiet grief; the peals of reckless laughter; the yearning sighs of tenderness . . . of a nation writhing helplessly under the grasp of her cruel and insolent oppressor.” Davis failed, the reviewer argued, because he lacked Moore’s musical genius and could not adapt the airs to his political sentiments. He fell short in “engrafting a bold self-reliant branch of melody on the old song tree,” while his new airs were a “lifeless corpse” built on

<sup>2</sup> Timothy M. Love, “Gender and the Nationalistic Ballad: Thomas Davis, Thomas Moore and Their Songs,” *New Hibernia Review* 21, no. 1 (2017): 68–85; quotation is from Leath Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender: The Construction of Irish National Identity, 1724–1874* (Notre Dame, 2005), 140.

<sup>3</sup> Thomas Davis, *Essays Literary and Historical*, ed. D. J. O’Donoghue (Dundalk, 1914), 269, quoted in Love, “Gender and the Nationalistic Ballad,” 79.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Davis, ed., *The Spirit of the Nation: Ballads and Songs* (Dublin, 1845), v–vi; Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*.

<sup>5</sup> Mary Helen Thunte, *The Harp Re-strung: The United Irishmen and the Rise of Irish Literary Nationalism* (Syracuse, 1994), 204; Love, “Gender and the Nationalistic Ballad,” 81.

<sup>6</sup> Davis, *Spirit of the Nation*, vi; Clare O’Halloran, “Irish Recreations of the Gaelic Past: The Challenge of Macpherson’s Ossian,” *Past and Present*, no. 124 (1989): 69–95.

<sup>7</sup> “Spirit of the Nation,” *Nation*, 21 December 1844.

<sup>8</sup> “Spirit of the Nation,” *Nation*, 21 December 1844.

the idea that “a mechanical reproduction in the peculiar structure of the rhythm, the monotonous resolving of the chords, a constant recurrence to minors,” was all that made Irish music. Rather, it was the “informing soul—the passionate, impulsive vehemence—the yearning, clinging tenderness, all the love, and all the mirth” that gave music its capacity to move others.<sup>9</sup>

As this debate suggests, the belief that music had the capacity to stir people to action—and particularly to produce political and nationalist sentiments—was widely accepted by contemporaries.<sup>10</sup> Which pieces of music might be effective in doing so, however, and why, remained open to discussion. Barrington’s lament is suggestive of belief in a normative system of evaluation, where music that incited “enthusiasm” (political sentiments) could be recognized and contrasted with that which was less effective in doing so. While Davis and the reviewers of the *Nation* rejected Moore as lacking the vigor to incite revolutionary fervor, they nonetheless recognized his musical popularity as a reflection of his talent and capacity to capture the nation’s grief and injustice. They produced a narrative by which Moore—so closely tied to the political leader Daniel O’Connell and his demands for constitutional reform—was effective in producing a concept of the wronged nation, necessary for this quieter type of politics but not for vigorous and manly national transformation.<sup>11</sup> Like Barrington, they assumed that the effects of music were transparent and measurable—if Moore did not enable revolution, it was an inadequacy of the art, not the people. Thus, logically, when the Young Irelanders’ music similarly failed to sustain a nationwide uprising in 1848, it was not the politics but the songs that were at fault.

The significance of music and song to political movements of the nineteenth century is now widely recognized, following a body of work on the role of culture in nation-building.<sup>12</sup> Irish song, in particular, has provided a rich source for capturing the political views and voices of “ordinary” people.<sup>13</sup> Historians of political

<sup>9</sup> “Moore and His Successors,” *Nation*, 1 September 1849.

<sup>10</sup> Katie Barclay, “Sounds of Sedition: Music and Emotion in Ireland, 1780–1845,” *Cultural History* 3, no. 1 (2014): 54–80; 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 *The Consumption of Culture 1600–1800: Image, Object, Text*, ed. Ann Bermingham and John Brewer (London, 1997), 514–34.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Helen Thuente, “The Folklore of Irish Nationalism,” in *Perspectives on Irish Nationalism*, ed. Thomas E. Hachey and Lawrence J. McCaffrey (Lexington, 1989), 42–60; Catriona Kennedy, “A Gallant Nation’: Chivalric Masculinity and Irish Nationalism in the 1790s,” in *Public Men: Masculinity and Politics in Modern Britain*, ed. Matthew McCormack (Basingstoke, 2007), 73–92.

<sup>12</sup> E. J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Thuente, *The Harp Re-strung*; Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*; Harry White, *The Keeper’s Recital: Music and Cultural History in Ireland, 1770–1970* (Notre Dame, 1998); Michael Murphy and Jan Smaczny, eds., *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland* (Dublin, 2007); Katie Barclay, “Singing and Lower-Class Masculinity in the Dublin Magistrate’s Court, 1800–1845,” *Journal of Social History* 47, no. 3 (2014): 746–68; Maura Cronin, “Memory, Story and Balladry: 1798 and Its Place in Popular Memory in Pre-famine Ireland,” in *Rebellion and Remembrance in Modern Ireland*, ed. Laurence McGearry (Dublin, 2001), 112–34; Barra Boydell, “‘Whatever Has a Foreign Tone/We Like Much Better than Our Own’: Irish Music and Anglo-Irish Identity in the Eighteenth-Century,” in *Music and Identity in Ireland and Beyond*, ed. Mark Fitzgerald and John O’Flynn (London, 2014), 19–38; Andrew Greenwood, “Rethinking the Songster and National Cosmopolitanism Identity in Lowland Scotland, c.1780–1830,” in *Cheap Print and Popular Song in the Nineteenth Century: A Cultural History of the Songster*, ed. Paul Watt, Derek B. Scott, and Patrick Spedding (Cambridge, 2017), 161–83.

music have given some attention to soundscapes, exploring the contexts in which music was played, heard, and learned; how the sharing of musical airs across songs allowed the transmission of complex messages, not least by turning a benign set of lyrics into something more radical; and what the meaning of lyrics might tell us about the nuances of political belief.<sup>14</sup> Research has also been done on the musical theory of the era and how it shaped ideas about the reception of music and its potential impacts on the body. Others have attempted to address the sound of politics, looking at music and its uses to support the political messages of particular pieces.<sup>15</sup> Richard Parfitt's exploration of music and Irish nationalism between 1848 and 1913 provides an important example of an attempt to bring many of these themes together to explain the grassroots impetus for the 1916 Uprising.<sup>16</sup>

I contribute to this debate by asking what politics sounds like for a mainstream Irish audience in the first half of the nineteenth century. Personal taste doubtless played a role in shaping responses to music, and this was an important concept of the period. Yet the fact that men like Barrington, Davis, and the writers for the British press believed that music could be judged by its capacity to stir political sentiments in the listener and that those sentiments might differ from other emotions is suggestive that politics had a "sound" for this social group.<sup>17</sup> The question then arises of how the historian might come to know and recognize music as political in nineteenth-century terms, to identify the music that could inspire enthusiasm and that which would fall flat.

It is a question that raises a set of methodological issues. How and why the sensate body responds to external stimuli is a topic of debate. Scholars of music and emotion have used an array of interdisciplinary approaches, drawing on philosophies, psychologies, and biologies to explain and predict music's capacity to affect the listener.<sup>18</sup> Much of this work has looked to underpin cultural and temporal specificity with universal explanations for how the body works. Yet a new scholarship on the history of emotions has challenged this model, questioning the primacy of the body in explaining emotional phenomena. Pointing particularly to performance and practice theories of the self, scholars have highlighted how the body is produced through ritual behaviors and the everyday, becoming through action.<sup>19</sup> Models offered by

<sup>14</sup> Una Hunt, *Sources and Style in Moore's Irish Melodies* (London, 2017); Davis, *Music, Postcolonialism and Gender*; Kate Bowan and Paul Pickering, "Songs for the Millions: Chartist Music and Popular Aural Tradition," *Labour History Review* 74, no.1 (2009): 44–63; Peter E. Gilmore, "Refracted Republicanism: Plowden's History, *Paddy's Resource*, and Irish Jacobins in Western Pennsylvania," *Pennsylvania History* 83, no. 3 (2016): 394–417; Mary Louise O'Donnell, "A Driving Image of Revolution: The Irish Harp and Its Utopian Space in the Eighteenth Century," *Utopian Studies* 21, no. 2 (2010): 252–73; Timothy M. Love, "Irish Nationalism, Print Culture and the *Spirit of the Nation*," *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 15, no. 2 (2018): 189–208.

<sup>15</sup> Barclay, "Sounds of Sedition"; Richard Leppert, "Social Order"; see also Tom Cochrane, Bernardino Fantini, and Klaus R. Scherer, eds., *The Emotional Power of Music: Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Musical Arousal, Expression, and Social Control* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>16</sup> Richard Parfitt, "Oh, What Matter, When for Erin Dear We Fall?: Music and Irish Nationalism, 1848–1913," *Irish Studies Review* 23, no. 4 (2015): 480–94.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology, and Socio-cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>18</sup> Cochrane, Fantini, and Scherer, *Emotional Power of Music*; Patrick N. Juslin, ed., *Handbook of Music and Emotion: Theory, Research, Applications* (Oxford, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion," *History and Theory* 51, no. 2 (2012): 190–220.

contemporary science may provide suggestive theories that aid analyses of the past but do not themselves explain historical phenomena.

In viewing the self as a product of culture, historians of emotion seek to situate emotional reactions within their historical and cultural context, placing the body as one resource among many—discourse and ideas, the material world, the environment—in the production of emotional phenomena.<sup>20</sup> To understand what politics sounded like in the nineteenth century thus involves an appreciation of how the period understood music to work on the body; how people identified political music and its responses; how they reported responding to music; and how the material culture—music and songbooks, instruments, performance spaces—shaped their behaviors. Some of these aspects are more accessible to the historian than others, and like all history, the restricted nature of the source material ensures that our capture of phenomena is partial. That performance can transform a piece of music but is not easily accessed by the historian is especially significant. In what follows, I combine a variety of sources designed to bring different perspectives to what politics sounded like. The philosophical theory that underpinned nineteenth-century musical responses has been explored elsewhere; rather than rehearsing these ideas, I begin by using discussions of bodily reactions to music in the popular press and general music-instruction literature to highlight how these ideas were translated and critiqued for non-specialist audiences. I also indicate in this section how various performance contexts were thought to shape music.

Next, I explore the role of lyrics and airs in directing the meaning of and response to political music. These materials were sourced from several major song collections of the era. *Paddy's Resource* (1795), which gives lyrics and the title of the accompanying air but no music, and *The Spirit of the Nation* (1845), which offers lyrics and music for the piano, both were (broadly defined) nationalist songbooks of the era, designed to promote a particular political vision.<sup>21</sup> Georges-Denis Zimmerman's *Songs of Irish Rebellion* (1967) is a modern collection of political—both nationalist and loyalist—music between 1780 and 1900, including a scholarly introduction, lyrics and airs, and notes on provenance.<sup>22</sup> George Petrie's *The Ancient Music of Ireland* (1855) is an antiquarian collection that includes nationalist and loyalist works and their lyrics and airs.<sup>23</sup> It also contains notes on provenance, style, and Petrie's interpretation of their value: he described "An Cleasaí Fir Óig" ("The Cunning Young Man"), for example, as a "beautiful and highly characteristic melody."<sup>24</sup> I use these sources to build a picture of the characteristics of political song; thus, the airs accompanying *Paddy's Resource* were sourced in later works, while Zimmerman's selection shaped the inclusion of material from the more wide-ranging Petrie. I use Petrie's description of musical style, as well as the theory from the first section, in the interpretation of the earlier works.

<sup>20</sup> Katie Barclay, *Men on Trial: Performing Emotion, Embodiment and Identity in Ireland, 1800–1845* (Manchester, 2019).

<sup>21</sup> *Paddy's Resource* (Belfast, 1795); Thomas Davis, ed., *Spirit of the Nation*, lib. ed. (Poole, 1845).

<sup>22</sup> Georges Denis Zimmerman, *Songs of the Irish Rebellion: Irish Political Street Ballads and Rebel Songs, 1780–1900* (Dublin, 1967).

<sup>23</sup> George Petrie, *The Petrie Collection of the Ancient Music of Ireland*, ed. David Cooper (Cork, 2002).

<sup>24</sup> Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 45.

The goal of this method is to produce multiple entry points for the historian interrogating the emotional effects of political music that these sources not only described but played an important role in producing. The sources were largely created by the literate and wide-ranging “middle part” of Irish society for a similar social group, but especially when appearing in the popular press, they could be widely accessed, reflecting the diverse audience for newspapers.<sup>25</sup> They may also provide insight into the perspectives of the Irish peasantry, often located as the original producers of this music. The authenticity of political music, for much of the social group that collected and listened to it, was born from its perceived antiquity, a tradition that many believed survived among the peasantry; its political efficacy was similarly measured by its uptake by that social group and ability to move it. At times, the peasantry were rendered passive agents in this process—the unthinking mob waiting to be manipulated by song and its masters—but it was nonetheless their political activity that marked music’s impact, that signified revolution.<sup>26</sup> Thus the political ballad was a medium designed to bring together social groups in Ireland, if often in ways that reinforced traditional power hierarchies. In identifying political music, this discussion not only contributes to the historiography of nineteenth-century music but also deepens our understanding of how music was used to political ends by nationalists at the start of the century.

## THEORIES AND CONTEXTS

The capacity of music to influence the sensate body had been of interest to European philosophers and artists since the classical period. By the early nineteenth century, following trends in Enlightenment thought, attention focused on the mechanics, both highlighting music’s influence on body and mind through the nerves and exploring the relationship between universal bodily reactions and national characteristics and personal taste.<sup>27</sup> It was broadly agreed that music could shape emotion and thus produce particular actions. This process could be orderly, as when music was used to produce sober, moral communities, or disorderly, when it stirred disaffection and revolution.<sup>28</sup> These ideas were widely disseminated in nineteenth-century Ireland, shaping popular ideas and social practice. They underpinned social reform efforts—such as temperance choirs and Singing for the Million (a social movement based on mass singing classes spearheaded by Joseph Mainzer), both designed for the moral reform of the poor—and music therapies used in asylums.<sup>29</sup>

How these effects happened was a more complex topic. Writers in the Irish press largely accepted that music affected the nervous system, but whether sound alone was

<sup>25</sup> See Barclay, *Men on Trial*.

<sup>26</sup> Barclay, “Sounds of Sedition.”

<sup>27</sup> Richard Leppert, “Social Order”; Tim Carter, “Music and Dance,” in *The Bloomsbury Cultural History of Emotions*, ed. Claire Walker, Katie Barclay, and David Lemmings (London, 2018), 53–69.

<sup>28</sup> Barclay, “Sounds of Sedition.”

<sup>29</sup> Maria McHale, “Singing and Sobriety: Music and the Temperance Movement in Ireland, 1838–43,” in Murphy and Smaczny, *Music in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, 166–86; “Advantages of a Knowledge of Vocal Music,” *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 17 June 1845; “Power of Music,” *Belfast Commercial Courier*, 17 December 1810.

enough to produce reform, both political and personal, was debated.<sup>30</sup> Some writers believed that music was edifying only if accompanied by a moral and well-rounded education: “As music tends to soothe and soften the mind, to awaken feeling and elevate the imagination, if . . . sound moral principles be neglected, *its* influence must be to produce a frivolous sentimentalism, or a gross effeminacy.”<sup>31</sup> As the debate over *Spirit of the Nation* suggests, some thought the role of lyrics was to direct morality.<sup>32</sup> Others provided complex analyses reflecting on the relationship between lyric, airs, historical context, and current need.

One article in the *Nation*, which actively advanced the use of music to produce political reform, described how to create music for nationalist sentiment. Like Davis, it directed musicians to the “original” Irish airs, music to be shared by all social groups, where they should listen closely and repeatedly to deduce its emotional effects—“gay, hopeful, loving, sentimental, lively, hesitating, woeful, despairing, resolute, fiery, or variable.” The author reminded readers that Irish airs took on a “different character” when played “fast or slow, lightly or strongly.” Once the character was determined, words should be produced to complement the effect—“nothing can be worse than . . . a gay song to calm music, or massive words to a delicate air.”<sup>33</sup> Tune was determinative here, fixing the numbers of words per line, and where the tune repeated, the lyrics should rhyme. According to Petrie and the Dublin music writer Richard Roe, a well-written song should also combine key syllables or words with musical emphases—often marked by the relative length of notes—without which “the rhythm is violated.”<sup>34</sup> It was a model that located Irish national sentiment in the oral tradition, placed the emotional character of music as something to be deduced by careful attention, and advocated that lyrical content should follow the music’s emotional framework. According to Davis, the songwriter should also consider the class of the audience. Songs for “Street and Field” should have “simple words, bold, strong imagery, plain, deep passions (love, patriotism, conciliation, glory, indignation, resolve), daring, humour, broad narrative, highest morals,” while music for elites could have greater subtlety—a logic that reflected a belief in the emotional sophistication of the upper classes.<sup>35</sup>

Music that was designed for political purposes—both in terms of its audience and its motivations, to produce, for example, patriotism or sorrow—should thus follow a general set of guidelines to enable its effects. Martial music, for example, was generally associated with marches and groups. *Spirit of the Nation* argued that its songs were “peculiarly fitted for bands and chorus singing” and would support “rich harmony.”<sup>36</sup> The author in the *Nation* article cited above believed that “double rhymes” (where rhyming lines were paired) were particularly suited for “political

<sup>30</sup> “Music and Morals,” *Cork Examiner*, 21 November 1842; “Effect of Music upon the Nerves,” *Belfast Protestant Journal*, 27 January 1849; James Kennaway, *Bad Vibrations: The History of the Idea of Music as a Cause of Disease* (London, 2016).

<sup>31</sup> “Music and Morals,” *Cork Examiner*, 21 November 1842. See also “To the Editor of the Erne Packet,” *Enniskillen Chronicle and Erne Packet*, 19 November 1829.

<sup>32</sup> See also “Literature,” *Belfast Newsletter*, 27 September 1844.

<sup>33</sup> “Irish Songs,” *Nation*, 4 January 1845.

<sup>34</sup> Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 36; Richard Roe, *The Principles of Rhythm* (Dublin, 1823).

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Davis, “Essay on Irish Songs,” in *The Book of Irish Ballads*, ed. Denis McCarthy (Dublin, 1846), 42–43; also, Barclay, “Sounds of Sedition.”

<sup>36</sup> “Douglas Jerrold’s Magazine,” *Vindicator*, 29 January 1845; Davis, *Spirit of the Nation*, vi.

and didactic songs,” as abstract ideas and political words were “of considerable length and gravity.”<sup>37</sup> Petrie believed that Irish marches, associated with festive activities, were quicker than English ones, typically a “lively or quick-step character”<sup>38</sup> and thus closely tied to lively jigs or battle tunes.

Political music, argued some, was also registered in a different tone. In *The British Empire in Europe*, Jean-Louis de Lolme argued that the late eighteenth century marked a shift in Irish music: “The Irish Harp had passed into a different modulation. It had left the *flat*, or minor, *Mode* or Key—the musical *Mode* of Plaint. It had passed into the *Mode* of reproach and demand. And the Irish Harp was sounding with the Third *sharp*, or *Tierce majeure*.”<sup>39</sup> Petrie complained that the popular march “The Return from Fingal” was typically played by pipers in the major mode rather than the minor, giving it a “barbarous character, destructive to the air.”<sup>40</sup> The idea that major and minor keys had particular emotional effects was repeated in many works of the period: “The Minor keys are used for dirges, Funeral marches, and other compositions in which it is desired to express great pathos.”<sup>41</sup> Political music that demanded action, according to this logic, was registered in major keys, since they were “cheerful and bold,” not “plaintive and wailing.”<sup>42</sup> Music designed for action could be directly contrasted with more “sorrowful” offerings, with Thomas Moore arguing that even the liveliest Irish music had a “melancholy note”—“some minor third or flat seventh.”<sup>43</sup> Martial and lively political music was also associated with a particular range of instruments that included the “trumpet, the voiceless herald of war,”<sup>44</sup> bagpipes,<sup>45</sup> fife, and drums.<sup>46</sup> These were instruments associated less with private entertainment than with marching bands, public spaces, and military activity.

Despite this association with public space, the location of political music varied. While the use of song as part of political rallies, temperance organizations, choirs, and local festivals highlights its communal nature, ballad collectors often noted more local, if still communal sites.<sup>47</sup> Petrie notes that the march “The King of Rath” was played for May festivals and spring fairs; most of his other airs were

<sup>37</sup> “Irish Songs,” *Nation*, 4 January 1845. See also the discussion in Roe, *Principles of Rhythm*, 72–108.

<sup>38</sup> Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 44.

<sup>39</sup> “Account of the First Part of the British Empire in Europe, written by the celebrated John Lewis De Lolme [sic], L.L.D.,” *Walker’s Hibernian Magazine: Or, Compendium of Entertaining Knowledge* (Dublin, 1787), 533–35, at 535.

<sup>40</sup> Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 69.

<sup>41</sup> G. F. Patton, *A Practical Guide to the Arrangement of Band Music* (New York, 1875), 6.

<sup>42</sup> James W. Wilson, *The Musical Cyclopaedia: Being a Collection of the Most Approved English, Scottish, and Irish Songs* (London, 1836), xii.

<sup>43</sup> Quoted in Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 91.

<sup>44</sup> “Grand Concert in Armagh—The Distin Family,” *Newry Telegraph*, 23 November 1839.

<sup>45</sup> “Married,” *Belfast News-Letter*, 16 April 1833.

<sup>46</sup> “The Soldier’s Progress,” *Newry Examiner and Louth Advertiser*, 22 September 1849; “The Saxon Shilling,” *Waterford Chronicle*, 21 January 1843; “Capture of Constantinople by the Turks,” *Southern Reporter and Cork Commercial Courier*, 15 December 1827.

<sup>47</sup> Gary Owens, “Nationalism without Words: Symbolism and Ritual Behaviour in the Repeal ‘Monster Meetings’ of 1843–5,” in *Irish Popular Culture, 1650–1850*, ed. James Donnelly and Kerby Miller (Dublin, 1998), 242–70; Maura Cronin, “Claiming the Landscape: Popular Balladry in Pre-famine Ireland,” in *Land and Landscape in Nineteenth-Century Ireland*, ed. Úna Ní Bhroiméil and Glenn Hopper (Dublin, 2008), 25–39.



collected from individual singers, some heard in taverns and homes.<sup>48</sup> Many political ballads circulated as broadsides, suggesting they would have been sung on the street by individuals before moving into communal contexts. Given that songbooks like *Singing for the Nation* and Petrie's *Ancient Ballads* transposed their airs for piano, the expectation was clearly that these songs would be used in middle-class homes.<sup>49</sup>

Regardless of location, political music was expected to produce an emotional effect. "Martial" music was typically described as uplifting, gay, lively, triumphal, or spirit-moving, terms suggestive of the emotional work it was expected to do. This idea can be seen in commentary around the effects of music on soldiers, whose regimental music was closely associated with the marches and airs of Irish nationalism and loyalism. As one article (attributed to Prince George of Hanover) in the *Belfast Newsletter* noted, "On no profession is the electric power of music exercised in a more striking manner, on none is its operation more refreshing and cheering." Even on the longest march, regimental music allowed the soldier to "breathe more freely" and "walk more lightly"; "his eyes become more animated, his bearing prouder," and he is reminded of "his vocation, his duty."<sup>50</sup> As music designed to cheer and animate, it was the counterpoint of the melancholy said to mark the work of people like Moore.<sup>51</sup> The "sound" of politics was thus lively and uplifting, militaristic, and intended to regulate and motivate group activity.

## LYRICS AND AIRS

In theory at least, political song was calculated to produce community identity, to uplift the spirits, and to direct singers and listeners toward their duty for the nation. Nineteenth-century commentators thought lyrics could play an important role here; some followed Rousseau's suggestion that words directed the emotion suggested by music to specific ends.<sup>52</sup> Mary Helen Thuente summarizes the content of the lyrics of nineteenth-century nationalist music as producing a "manly" and "heroic" counterpoint to the "passive," "melancholy," and "nostalgic" offerings of the eighteenth-century tradition. Both traditions tended to focus on individual heroes, local events, and a nostalgic relation to a lost Ireland, but later texts concentrated on affirming the manly character of these tragic heroes rather than their fatalistic suffering.<sup>53</sup> These later texts were also more likely to promote violent militarism, joy, and national pride, asking the population to wake and arise. Songs written by or to aid middle-class nationalist leaders, such as O'Connell or Davis, tended to be anti-sectarian, in stark contrast to much popular balladry.

Thuente's description underplays the significant political edge of much Irish nationalist music. *Paddy's Resource* was remarkably popular revolutionary propaganda, designed to promote knowledge and investment in the key ideals of liberty

<sup>48</sup> Petrie, *Petrie Collection*, 44.

<sup>49</sup> Claire Nelson, "Tea-Table Miscellanies: The Development of Scotland's Song Culture, 1720–1800," *Early Music*, no. 28 (2000): 597–619.

<sup>50</sup> "Influences of Music," *Belfast Newsletter*, 29 December 1840.

<sup>51</sup> Barclay, "Sounds of Sedition."

<sup>52</sup> Maurice Cranston, *Jean-Jacques: The Early Life and Work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, 1712–1754* (Chicago, 1991), 278.

<sup>53</sup> Thuente, "Folklore of Irish Nationalism."

and equality.<sup>54</sup> Songs not only gave listeners access to events associated with the French Revolution but, through repeated references to freedom, liberty, boldness, and conversely, tyranny and slavery, inculcated listeners in what would become the key liberal values of constitutional democracy: “But all ranks to the tune of EQUALITY dance, boy / Oh! it does my heart good just to hear how they prance, boy.”<sup>55</sup> These were ideas that recurred in later collections, although in a mediated form: “Come all you true born Irishmen that love your liberty.”<sup>56</sup>

Not all nationalist music was overtly engaged in political revolution, with a continuing focus on local heroes who suffered for the nation. If earlier tales were fatalistic, early nineteenth-century accounts were explicit articulations of injustice, locating the tragic hero as a victim of an enemy state. The song “Michael Boylan” blamed Boylan’s execution for revolution on perjury and his unwillingness to turn state’s evidence; the hero of “General Munro” fought for “liberty and freedom” for the nation but was betrayed by a woman and executed “that very same day,” suggesting the absence of a fair trial. These songs passed along historical information about nationalist martyrs and the political cause they represented. Verses that located less well-known heroes in a tradition of such sacrifice —“Brave Emmet, Fitzgerald and General Munro”—reinforced this message.<sup>57</sup> The songs were often more overtly militaristic than the ones in *Paddy’s Resource*; those had asked listeners to stand together, be bold, and not stop until tyranny had fallen, but the mechanism for change was less explicit, although regular references to France were suggestive. In contrast, ballads about political martyrs mentioned their military engagements, less a revolution in sentiment than an example for action. Following street ballad format, such songs reinforced their message through set phrases borrowed from other pieces to encourage familiarity with the narrative structure: “Good people pay attention, and listen unto me;” “Long life to Lord Moira, and long may he reign.”<sup>58</sup>

The lyrics of the *Nation* songbook were much admired but were often closer to the tradition of middle-class poetry published weekly in Irish newspapers than that in broadsides or even *Paddy’s Resource*. While there was significant variety in the *Spirit of the Nation’s* 350 pages, many songs had more words per line than earlier collections, and the vocabulary could be ornate:

Sire, said the writing, Thyrsis, who in pain  
Has served thee hitherto, this boon demands—  
His freedom—neither should his suit be vain,  
After six lustres’ service in thy bands.<sup>59</sup>

Many of the songs located Ireland in a mythical imaginary, their descriptions of sublime landscapes designed to produce an affective relation to the nation informed by Romanticism and experienced as a quiet patriotism, a blend of love and pride.

<sup>54</sup> Gilmore, “Refracted Republicanism.”

<sup>55</sup> “Liberty and Equality; or Dermot’s Delight,” in *Paddy’s Resource*, 1.

<sup>56</sup> “Captain Doorley and the Boyne,” in Zimmerman, *Songs*, 152.

<sup>57</sup> “General Munro,” in Zimmerman, *Songs*, 157.

<sup>58</sup> “The Sorrowful Lamentations of Dennis Mahony;” and “General Munro,” in Zimmerman, *Songs*, 200.

<sup>59</sup> E. N. Shannon, “Sonnet,” in Davis, *Spirit of the Nation*, 11.

Others were more direct. Davis in particular was recognized for his songwriting skill, and his lyrics are marked by shorter lines, less flowery language, and greater repetition; they are more easily envisioned by a modern reader as songs to be remembered and performed by a group, particularly one with limited literacy. Davis also promoted a more optimistic register: “Ireland, rejoice”; “We’ll enjoy our own again”; “Oh hurrah! for the men, who, when danger is nigh, / Are found in the front, looking death in the eye.”<sup>60</sup>

When interpreted through the lens of nineteenth-century theorists, all of these song styles reflected in some way the desirable qualities of political lyrics. Davis’s technique, aiming for bold imagery, short phrases, and a cheerful aspect, was perhaps the best example, but the overt militarism, rhyming structure, and invocation of patriotic feelings of the earlier pieces, particularly in *Paddy’s Resource*, would have been regarded positively. Less successful, according to these rules, were the more ornate pieces in *Spirit of the Nation*, perhaps imagined for a middle-class readership to enjoy in the home. A number of political laments would have struggled to conform to the ideal. While broadsides that give accounts of political martyrs may seem less than triumphant, they often use injustice to reinforce patriotism and to encourage unity and revenge. Thus they have endings designed to uplift, or at least to promote action.

It was not only the lyrics that contributed to the effect of song: the music was also considered to be critical. Tunes were routinely transposed by performers for different instruments, and collectors like Petrie, in arranging for piano, harmonized according to the major or minor scale rather than modally, both musical techniques thought to shape the emotional register of the tune.<sup>61</sup> Barrington’s air for the “Volunteers’ March,” accompanied by his critique of it as a “soporific,” is suggestive, however, of the uses of airs for the historian (see figure 1). While the journalist Thomas MacNevin wrote that the “Volunteers’ March” had its own lyrics,<sup>62</sup> Barrington did not record them, rather noting that “at public dinners and meetings [the march] invariably accompanied *God Save the King* and the popular ballad, *St Patrick’s Day in the Morning*.” Nor was it alone in facing Barrington’s condemnation. He noted that much Royalist music was similarly “of the dullest nature,” aligning the march with “Croppies Lie Down,” “King William over the Water, &c.” (both Ireland), “Yankee Doodle” (US), and “Henry the Fourth” (France). Scotland’s offerings, “Jenny Cameron” and “The White Cockade,” while “the liveliest,” were a “bellowing monotony” played “loud and harsh” on the chanter. Barrington was marginally more complimentary of “The Roast Beef of Old England,” a “substantial and peaceable” air suitable for the “operation it was intended to precede” (namely, dinner).<sup>63</sup> Barrington’s reading of the air may have been designed to reinforce the Volunteers’ activities as loyal and patriotic rather than rebellious, but it relied on a set of assumptions around the capacities of music to enable political sentiment, where military music should be “gay and lively.”

<sup>60</sup> See various in Davis, *Spirit of the Nation*.

<sup>61</sup> Aloys Fleischmann, “Aspects of George Petrie IV: Petrie’s Contribution to Irish Music,” *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 72 (1972): 195–218.

<sup>62</sup> Thomas MacNevin, *The History of the Volunteers of 1782* (Dublin, 1853), 119.

<sup>63</sup> Barrington, *Historic Memoirs of Ireland*, 2:173–80.



Figure 1—Air to the “Volunteer’s March,” in Barrington, *Historic Memoirs of Ireland*, 2:176.

The air supplied by Barrington was played in F major in 2/4 time. Zimmerman supplied a different air, taken from Petrie, in G major in 2/4 time. Like most airs associated with political music in these collections—and with Irish folk music more generally—both versions of the “Volunteers’ March” use major scales. While nineteenth-century music theory was moving away from associating specific scales with particular emotional effects, it remained a popular idea. Thus, G major was “gay and sprightly,” C “bold, vigorous and commanding.” B major, thought one writer, was “the least interesting. . . without sufficient fire to render it majestic or grand.”<sup>64</sup> This opinion was not universal; another critic associated it with “cheerful[ness], love, clear conscience, hope, longing for a better world.”<sup>65</sup> Its relative minor in G was associated with “melancholy,” or alternatively “rancour and discontent,” which also had their political uses. Viewed through this interpretive lens, the F major found in Barrington’s air was “rich, mild, and contemplative” and related to “serenity and repose” or “pleasure and repose” (its relative minor, D, was regarded similarly, though more “grand”).<sup>66</sup> It may be these associations with peace and thoughtfulness that caused Barrington to doubt the air’s ability to stir martial spirit; its direct comparison with the dull but “substantial and peaceable” “Roast Beef of Old England” is thus not insignificant.

Along with the tone of music, rhythm and tempo were also important in shaping musical resonance for nineteenth-century audiences. Contemporary music theorists did not explore rhythm in depth, often tying discussion directly to the relationship between lyrics and music. Thus Barrington’s “March,” with a relatively high

<sup>64</sup> John Weeks Moore, *Complete Encyclopaedia of Music* (Boston, 1854), 479.

<sup>65</sup> John Dwight, *Dwight’s Journal of Music*, vols. 13–14 (Boston, 1859), 126.

<sup>66</sup> Moore, *Complete Encyclopaedia*, 479.

number of shorter notes, was perhaps too limited to reinforce the key words that needed emphasis for music to be political. Roe argued that repetition in music was critical to producing emotional effects, where “by being repeated again and again, it comes . . . to move, to agitate, and to transport us.”<sup>67</sup> Barrington’s notation highlights the tune’s rhythmic regularity, a repetition that would enable memory. But it also contained a number of leaps (a full octave in the first bar, a descending major sixth in the second, for example) that would be beyond the range of most singers, making communal singing challenging. In comparison, the “Marseillaise” featured a dotted rhythm and several long notes, offering opportunities to emphasize particular lyrics.<sup>68</sup>

Time signatures are similarly suggestive of the style of music. Most political music in these collections used simple meter. A 4/4 time signature was widely used for all types of music; in *Spirit of the Nation*, music was usually accompanied by references to moderate (*moderato*) or walking-pace tempo (*andante*), perhaps indicating its utility for easy marching or singing. Particularly popular was 6/8, known for its liveliness. It typically came with a fast-moving tempo, something supported by the notes on many pieces—“*allegro*,” and “*vivace*.” A time signature of 2/4 was similar, found in polkas and marches. It is likely that Barrington heard the “Volunteers’ March” at the slower walking pace, as he observed that for quick step the Volunteers used “Lillaballera” [*sic*] (also known as “The Protestant Boys”), noting the irony of a sectarian tune being enjoyed by all religious sects: “Such an unqualified ascendancy had the spirit of national liberty assumed over all feelings of religion, or jealousy of intolerance.”<sup>69</sup> The use of 2/4 in both versions of the “Volunteers’ March” is therefore not surprising, suitable for a moderately paced walk, but it may have been slower than the “Marseillaise” (associated with a “lively” tempo) that Barrington so admired.<sup>70</sup> If Barrington considered this air a failure, its lack of success can be analyzed through a close reading, where key, rhythm, and tempo came to shape its political effects.

## CONCLUSION

While Barrington thought the “Volunteers’ March” uninspiring, he noted that it was adopted “universally,” heard “at all public places, theatres, and in the streets &c., by every sort of performer, and on all instruments.” He particularly described the critical role it played at the 1783 National Convention of Volunteers (where they proposed changes to the Irish constitution) during their procession through Dublin. As part of a spectacle that included firing cannons and a marching militia in dress uniforms, with weapons and bright standards, and led by religious leaders, several bands played the march for the watching crowd. Barrington noted that they produced a “firm and awful enthusiasm” in their audience. For a young man leading his battalion, the event left an impression that “even in age, is vivid and animating”—“a glowing patriotism, a military feeling, and an instinctive, though a senseless lust for actual service.”<sup>71</sup> If the music alone was not enough to inspire Barrington, as

<sup>67</sup> Roe, *Principles of Rhythm*, 186.

<sup>68</sup> Thanks to the reviewers for improving this discussion.

<sup>69</sup> Barrington, *Historic Memoirs of Ireland*, 2:173–80.

<sup>70</sup> Johan Fornäs, *Signifying Europe* (Bristol, 2012), 149–201.

<sup>71</sup> Barrington, *Historic Memoirs of Ireland*, 2:173–80.

part of a military spectacle it produced the desired emotion. Even a dull air, if performed well, could produce political enthusiasm.

Yet if performance was ultimately key, normative ideas shaped how people understood and experienced music in the political domain. In early nineteenth-century Ireland, music allied with political or nationalist activities was associated with major keys, linked in the cultural imagination with specific emotional effects, and with time signatures and tempos used for marches and quick-moving dances. Lyrics tended to offer a political education in key ideals, or historic events, conveying the injustice of contemporary conditions and designed to provoke action. Political music should be “uplifting,” “gay,” “lively,” and for marching music, “martial,” enabling an emotional and intellectual transformation that would encourage participation in political life. This understanding of political music can be contrasted with the emphasis placed on traditional Irish music as melancholic or sorrowful—a political claim of another kind, but one considered ill-suited to nineteenth-century nationalism. Political music was marked by a militarism prominent in other aspects of nineteenth-century life and drew in a broad range of social groups. Thus the sound of politics narrowed in its form and in the nature of the enthusiasm desired from it.

Although direct access to what a person feels or hears in listening to music is challenging even now, a reflection on normative ideals about the effects of music and how it was thought to shape the emotions of the listener can provide an entry point into past experience. Comparing such ideals with the traces of musical performance—from songbooks, lyrics, and airs, to personal listening accounts—can help build a picture of soundscapes and their emotional impacts. This process is not straightforward, especially for specific songs. Barrington’s account is only one perspective; we do not know if his notation of the tune is accurate, let alone how it was transformed across instruments, musicians, and performance contexts. Yet when his account is placed alongside similar sources, a picture can be built of the types of music thought to be political and the emotions expected from the listener. For an era in which political music had distinct features, traces of the sound of politics can provide further insight into our understanding of the relationship between music and political life.