When The News Was Sung: Ballads as News Media in Early Modern Europe

ABSTRACT

News songs differ in crucial ways to the other news media of the early modern period. As a result, historians need to ask different questions of these multi-media artifacts. How did the presentation of this performative genre affect the dissemination and reception of information about events? What part do orality and aurality play in how the news was sold and received? What kind of information can ballads provide about specific news events that other documents cannot or will not provide? This article seeks to answer these questions, and suggest some of the skills historians need to develop in order to appreciate the full meaning of songs as the most popular of news media in early modern Europe.

MAIN TEXT

In a fictional account of the annual Frankfurt market-fair from 1596, a Brillenkrämer, or seller of reading-glasses, contemplates a change of profession:

I ought to change my line:
I'm going to buy in more news-sheets,
since there's such demand for them now.
I can compose them myself on occasion.
It doesn't matter much whether the story's true.
The world wants to be deceived,
they buy lies for good money.
The more outrageous the lie, the better the sales,
as all singers know very well.¹

In this short diatribe the seller reveals several important aspects of news-songs in the early modern period. First, they were extremely popular, enough that the Brillenkrämer wants to take up their production as his new source of income. Second, they could be composed by a range of people: although he is no specialist the Brillenkrämer claims he can 'on occasion' compose them himself; presumably

the rest of the time the news-songs would be composed by others. Third, they could be thought of as unreliable, but this was of little concern to their consumers. Lastly, they were sensationalist, because that was their biggest selling point. What is taken for granted, however, is that the news was sung. In early modern Europe, where literacy rates were low, song was the most effective medium of information dissemination and circulation. In most European countries news-songs were set to familiar tunes, which allowed anyone with access to the text to sing it immediately. Melody, rhyme and metre aided memorisation, and meant that the song could be quickly and easily passed on to those without access to literacy or access even to the news-sheet itself.

This article takes a transnational and *longue durée* approach, looking at songs about news events across Europe from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, to reveal extraordinary continuities across both space and time. While there were local variations, for example in terms of melody chosen or printing format, what is striking about the singing of news is its enduring appeal for centuries across geographic, confessional, and social boundaries. This article thus develops Andrew Pettegree's comparative study of news-singing by suggesting a novel approach to this unique form of news.² For news-songs differ in crucial ways to the other news media of the early modern period like newsletters, newspapers, or diplomatic correspondence – they differ even from the prose broadsheets and pamphlets that they so closely resemble.³ As historians of news we need to ask different kinds of questions of these multi-media artifacts. For example, how does the presentation in a performative genre affect the dissemination and reception of information about events? What part do orality and aurality play in how the news was sold and received? Here the activities and social status of street singers play an important role. We must consider the production, format and distribution of these songs in order to understand their impact. We also need to pay attention to the conjunction of text and melody, and the ways in which this affected the presentation of a news

event. On a broader scale, what kind of information can ballads provide about specific news events that other documents cannot or will not provide? As we shall see, the ability to memorise a song allowed critics of the authorities to avoid being caught with libelous written material. And lastly, how should historians deal with these profoundly emotive texts? The combination of sensationalist language and affecting music meant that songs had the potential to provoke a more powerful response than any other contemporary news source, and this emotional potency can at times be challenging for a present-day historian to decipher and explain. This article will suggest some of the skills we as historians need to develop in order to appreciate the full meaning of songs as the most popular of news media in early modern Europe.

Composition

How were news-songs created? What were the links between the event and the dissemination of news about it? Most news-songs were, like the majority of cheap print, anonymously authored. This could be at times because of their political or controversial content. In the religiously divided city of Augsburg, the expulsion in June 1584 of the Protestant preacher Georg Müller caused a great deal of social unrest. The Catholic city authorities attempted to clamp down on any forms of subversive material, in particular the many songs that were composed in protest of the expulsion by the city's residents. The trial records, studied by Alexander Fisher, reveal a great deal about how news-songs were composed. In his interrogation, Abraham Schädlin, a weaver from Augsburg, confessed that

he fled to Ulm on account of a song he wrote concerning Doctor Müller. But he did not distribute it. Rather, he wished to dedicate it to Daniel Weiss's wife, but another named Georg Braun found it on [Schädlin's] person and asked him if he could have it so he could show it to his wife. Then Braun copied it and distributed it, so that everyone knew that

[Schädlin] had [written] it. [...] He did indeed make this song and showed it to others, but he only found out later that he had done wrong.⁴

We can glean a great deal from Schädlin's testimony about the production and dissemination of political songs: an ordinary tradesman could compose one, and it would be copied and distributed by others. Although Schädlin did not claim to have had the song printed, it exists in multiple printed copies. The song, 'Wo es Gott nit mit Augspurg helt', was a contrafact, or a re-wording, of a well known Lutheran psalm tune 'Wo Gott der Herr nicht bei uns hält', an already controversial Protestant song, so Schädlin's claims that he was unaware 'he had done wrong' were clearly disingenuous.

Around the same time another weaver, Jonas Losch, also confessed to having been partly responsible for composing a different song about Georg Müller.⁵ He claimed that

Last Sunday an apprentice from Memmingen named Michael Karg came to him and brought him a printed song, which he copied, writing at the top, 'I, Jonas Losch, made this song'. But he did nothing more than add a little bit to it, and change a few stanzas; in particular he wrote the entire last stanza himself. He does not know where Karg went thereafter; he thinks he went to Ulm. There is a preacher in Ulm named Herr Peter who also wrote a song about the uprising, which he had heard sung there.⁶

Losch's testimony reveals that it was possible for the consumer of a printed song to amend it, and produce a new version. It also reveals that preachers were active in the composition of such songs.

This kind of production, circulation, and censorship of politically controversial songs is also evident in France where songs attacking Louis XV and his ministers and mistresses were so numerous that they filled whole songbooks such as the *Chansonnier Maurepas*.⁷ Transcripts of the interrogations of those found with such songs reveal a similarly active community of writers circulating and improving upon each others' creative work. The interrogation of Jean Le Mercier in July 1749 revealed

that last winter the deponent, who was in the seminary of St. Nicolas du Chardonnet, heard one day the sieur Thret, who was then also in the same seminary, reciting couplets from a song against the court starting with these words, 'That a bastard strumpet'; that the deponent asked for the song from Thret, who gave it to him and to which the deponent made a few notes... Added the deponent that on the same sheet ... there were two pieces of verses on the subject of the Pretender, ... which two pieces the deponent copied and destroyed in the same time without having distributed them to anyone.⁸

The unique qualities of songs – rhythm, rhyme and melody – that allowed them to be more easily memorized than a prose account made them especially suitable for the passing on of libelous or treasonous opinion: once memorized, the text could be disposed of. Notably, as well as another contrafact ('That a bastard strumpet' was set to the tune 'Dirai-je mon confiteor', a very popular tune for anti-monarchical songs), here we see multiple songs on the same sheet, another common feature which will be discussed later.⁹ In this instance we have educated seminarians composing pornographic and libelous songs and circulating them, but the German examples show that song writing was an activity open to people of all social statuses and education levels, and had been for two centuries. Adam Fox has shown how in Jacobean England libelous songs were regularly composed even by

those with no or little literacy.¹⁰ News-songs were often composed by those who sold them: in Württemberg in 1648, a colporteur called Buchhänlein made a copper etching of a reported vision of an angel, composed a song, and then distributed the broadside from inn to inn.¹¹ In Italy, the street singer Bighignol composed, printed and disseminated a song on the naval battle between the Ferrarese and the Venetians in December 1509 within two weeks of the event.¹² A minority of ballad writers could have been considered professional, and were known for their work. The variety of the repertoire of the early seventeenth-century English balladeer Martin Parker was celebrated by Henry Peacham in a 1641 pamphlet: 'For a peny you may have all the Newes in England, of Murders, Flouds, Witches, Fires, Tempests, and what not, in one of Martin Parkers Ballads'.¹³ Ballad composition, therefore, was open to those of all social classes and cultural backgrounds, and could be both a casual pastime or a steady source of income, making it difficult to make any kind of claim of a 'typical' news-song writer. There were, however, characteristic features of news-songs that all writers would have borne in mind: melody and format.

Contrafactum

The social impact of news-songs lay not only in the texts, but also in the tunes to which they were set. The process of contrafactum, putting new words to well-known songs, was a feature of most early modern ballads. As I've argued elsewhere, certain tunes were chosen deliberately for the cultural and emotional associations that they carried with them from their earlier versions, and so the choice of tune had important consequences for the overall meaning of the new song.¹⁴ This is why Jonas Losch's interrogators were so keen to ascertain exactly which melody he had chosen to set his song to. Losch originally claimed 'Since the song had no melody [indicated], he copied it in such a way that it could be sung to the tune of 'Ich stund an einem Morgen, heimlich an einem Ort'.' The interrogators were not convinced, however, and continued to question him:

Since this song has a different melody than the one he recently stated, did he not make the entire song himself?

Losch: He meant that he had indicated the tune 'Ich stund an einem Morgen' at the beginning, and added to this: 'as well as 'Lobt Gott, ihr frommen Christen'.¹⁵

This admission is important: 'Lobt Gott, ihr frommen Christen', unlike the benign 'Ich stund an einem Morgen', was a propagandistic song decrying Catholic opposition to Luther's teachings. The choice of tune, then, added to the already controversial text, attacking Catholics both in word and melody.¹⁶

Not just Protestants were skilled at this kind of provocative tune choice; songs about the besieged Protestant towns during the French Wars of Religion were composed by Catholics in the voices of the wives of Protestant leaders, who sang of their regret at their husbands' heresy. These were set to the tune of 'Dames d'honneur je vous prie à mains jointes', a tune regularly used for the traditional laments of noblewomen at the deaths of their lords. Linking the tune choice with a specific depiction of gender roles, Kate van Orden notes that 'poets, printers, and pamphleteers mobilized the voices of women to articulate moral and religious stances that ... were right in line with the goals of a Catholic monarchy.'¹⁷ Not only was contrafactum a constant feature across the religious divide, melodies could even cross national borders: the sombre melody 'Fortune My Foe' was the most popular tune for all sixteenth- and seventeenth-century ballads in both English and Dutch. Similarly, the melody of the 'Wilhelmuslied', the folk song used by both Catholic and Protestant forces to vaunt their military victories in the Thirty Years War (and which would become Holland's national anthem), was taken from a French song about the Protestant siege of Chartres in 1568.¹⁸ A multilingual

approach to the history of news-singing thus reveals a deliberate and often sophisticated use of melody across early modern Europe.

Format

News-songs could be written by diverse composers and set to meaningful tunes; they could also be printed in a range of formats that had consequences for how they might be sold, consumed and kept. In Italy, they were printed in octavo-style format, often featuring an illustration on the title page. In England, ballads were more likely to be sold in broadside format, with one song and often an illustration of the news event. Broadside allowed the consumer to paste the song onto the wall, and there is ample evidence in England for the practice of pasting broadside ballads to the walls of homes and alehouses. In Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair*, Cokes exclaims to Mrs Overdo, 'O sister, do you remember the ballads over the nursery-chimney at home o' my own pasting up!'.¹⁹ Similarly, Isaac Walton revealed that 'I can't, for my Heart, leave a Room before I have thoroughly studied the Walls of it, and examined the several printed Papers which are usually pasted upon them' and continued with a discussion of a ballad he had seen.²⁰ The use of ballads as wallpaper was not only for aesthetic reasons, it also encouraged their repeated use: a character in the play *The Triumphant Widow* remarks to his sister, 'Oh, Cicely, here's the brave Ballet you and I use to sing, I know it by the Picture.'²¹ German ballads could take the broadside format, although they could also be found in the octavo-style, sometimes with another song or two advertised on the title page. French news-songs, however, could be found in a variety of formats; the 1705 song on the execution of Pierre Antoine Hugues was a single-sheet with the text printed both recto and verso, which would prevent its use as wallpaper.

Many early modern French songs are, however, more likely to be found in *recueils*, cheap songbooks that often contained a multitude of songs on a surprisingly broad range of topics.²² These *recueils* tend to have titles that hint at the broad range of

songs they contain: the 1580 Lyon songbook *The Rosary of new songs. As much about love as about war, containing mostly the happy victories obtained in Auvergne and elsewhere*²³ indicates that it would be suitable for Catholic royalist supporters to purchase, while the 1579 songbook *Summary of all the collections of songs, as much amorous, rustic as musical*²⁴ gives no indication that it contains some virulently anti-Huguenot songs. Such diversity within these songbooks raises questions about how they were sold and used. How did street singers choose which songs to perform in order to sell them? Were the titles deliberately ambiguous so as to hide the political and potentially controversial songs inside? We must pay attention to the format in which news-songs were printed; as we shall see, it could have profound consequences not only for the dissemination of news but also for its interpretation.

Dissemination of news-songs

What was it like to hear a news-song? Where did one do this? Louis Sébastien Mercier recounts how songs about executed criminals were performed in late eighteenth-century Paris:

There are still complaints about hanged men and those broken on the wheel, that the people listen to with tears in their eyes and that they rush to buy. When, to the delight of the poet of the Pont Neuf, some illustrious figure mounts the scaffold, his death is put into rhyme and sung to the accompaniment of a violin. In this way everything in Paris is the subject of song; and no matter whether one is a Maréchal of France or a hanged man, if you're not put into song you will be unknown to the people. I put it to you that in the streets of the capital [the convicted murderer] Desrues is better known than Voltaire.²⁵

Mercier's account tells us that news-songs were performed on the Pont Neuf, often with musical accompaniment, and people would listen and be visibly moved

on the hearing. They would then buy the song, and – importantly – this was a primary source of information about these events for them (‘if you’re not put into song you will be unknown to the people’). Unsurprisingly, ballad-singers often chose densely populated areas like crowded bridges, fairs and markets to advertise their wares. Sarah Batchelor, the guilty party in a theft in London in 1740, was identified because the witness claimed of her, ‘I knew her no otherways, than by singing Ballads about the Market.’²⁶ The Venetian Council of Ten recognised the popularity of such areas in a 1543 injunction stating that every new text had to be subjected to pre-publication censorship which was directed at those ‘who sell such books and works, prognostications, stories and songs, letters and other similar things on the Rialto bridge, and in other places of this city.’²⁷ The move towards censorship reflected the potential for dangerous subversion that street-singers presented by singing these songs in the most public of places.

The socially marginal status of singers also meant that they were often linked with criminality.²⁸ This link was so strong in the minds of the English that the mere mention in Old Bailey trials that a witness was a ballad-singer was enough to entirely discredit their testimony. Thus, while deponents regularly deny their involvement in ballad-singing as a profession, there are nevertheless multiple occasions when it is clear that this is their trade: in the criminal cases at the Old Bailey we regularly bump into characters such as ‘Singing Jenny’ or ‘Ballad-singing Jack’.²⁹ By contrast, the German *Bänkelsangers* and Italian *cantastorie*, while itinerant and often living a somewhat precarious existence, often travelled with large oil paintings of various news events and stories that they could point to while singing.³⁰ To travel, sometimes vast distances, around the country with what were effectively props argues for a strong identification with the profession of ballad-singing, rather than a casual hobby. But news-singers could rarely escape the wary eyes of the authorities, who associated their profession with vagrancy and begging. In 1580, Wilhelm V, duke of Bavaria, commanded town councils to ban ‘useless

German singing' (*teuschen unnützen Gesang*) in front of homes by 'wandering, masterless boys and trouble-makers' (*umlaufende Herrnlose Buben, und Stürzer*).³¹

And it wasn't only the authorities who perceived news-singers to be disreputable. In 1670 the writer Hans Jakob von Grimmelshausen placed street singers in a contemptuous list of dubious occupations that one might find in the marketplace: 'all sorts of vagabonds... such as puppeteers, rope-dancers, conjurers, news-singers, glue-boilers, knife-grinders, plumbers, lady harpists, master-beggars, tricksters and all the rest of the honourable riff-raff.'³² The notorious reputation of street singers was even memorialised in a ballad, *A Caveat for Cutpurses*, which warned the audience for street songs that they were being distracted while their purses were being robbed:

But now to my hearers this Counsel I give,
And pray friends remember it as long as you live,
Bring out no more cash in purse pocket or wallet,
Then one single penny to pay for the Ballet,
For Cut-purse doth shrowd
Himself in a Cloud,
theres many a purse hath been lost in a crowd
For hes the most rogue that doth crowd up & curses
Who first cryes my Masters beware of your purses.³³

Why then, given the disreputable status of news ballads and their vendors, would anyone listen to one, or even more significantly, buy one? Although the sale of news-songs was often carried out by a group of sellers associated with duplicitousness and criminality it does not follow that the songs themselves were any less reliable as a source of news. Songs about the punishment of German criminals were often based closely on the *Urgicht*, the official confession, that was

read in public.³⁴ But their popular – as opposed to official – status meant that songs could be a source of information that the authorities preferred not to divulge. These songs as a form of unofficial news could result when the wishes of the authorities went against the tide of popular opinion, such as in the treatment of vilified criminals.

Ballads as a source of unofficial news

Pierre Craon (or Créon), better known as Nez d'argent, was a Huguenot preacher from Dijon who in 1561 was involved in the Saint-Médard riot in Paris, where Huguenots, provoked by the sound of church bells being rung by the Catholic church of Saint-Médard trying to drown out the sounds of their service, went over to the church where they began to riot and commit acts of iconoclasm.³⁵ For his part in the riot Nez d'argent was hanged, and would have had his remains burned, except that spectators interrupted the ritual to enact their own vengeance, dragging his corpse to the dungheap and mutilating it. It would appear that the spectators felt that burning was not shameful enough for a heretic, but the end result was that the authorities lost control of the execution ritual. The song about this ritual gone wrong is set to the tune 'la fille portant panier' which is lost, but the rapid rhythm and metre of the verse, particularly the use of predominantly monosyllabic vocabulary, indicates that this is most likely to have been a lively tune, with four lines of six syllables followed by an emphatic eight-syllable rhyming couplet:

Quand ils l'eurent jetté
Du haut de la potence,
Tous ces petits enfans
Se sont remis ensemble,
A la voirie l'ont trainé,
L'avoit il pas bien merité?

Once they had thrown him
From the height of the scaffold,
All these little children
Got together
Dragged him to the dungheap
Didn't he deserve it?

Quand ils l'eurent trainé
 Dedans son cymetiere,
 Par dedans le ruisseau
 Qui luy servoit de biere,
 Lors ses tripailles vont tirer
 Pour dedans un feu les jeter

When they had dragged him
 Into his cemetery,
 Along the stream
 That served him as a bier.
 Then pulled out his innards
 To throw them in a fire.

Quand ils l'eurent trainé
 Ou estoit son sepulchre,
 Bien tost luy ont osté
 Les tripes & la fressure,
 Puis de son coeur un chien l'a avallé,
 Voila allé, voila allé.

When they had dragged him
 To where his sepulchre was,
 Soon they had removed
 His guts and organs,
 Then a dog swallowed his heart,
 There you go, there you go.³⁶

The breakdown in social order that allowed Nez d'argent to be mutilated is an event the authorities would have preferred to cover up. Instead the people's unofficial participation was put into song, allowing knowledge of the events to be repeated ad infinitum.

Audience participation

The tune to which the Nez d'argent song was set was likely to have been a nursery rhyme, like another mocking song in the same *recueil* about a Huguenot whose executed corpse was similarly mutilated, the lieutenant of Pontoise.³⁷ Such a choice of tune not only reminded the singers of the children's participation in the mutilation, but also encouraged them to join in a simple, child-like song. An important characteristic of news-songs was their ability to promote audience participation. Some song types, especially those with a refrain, allowed listeners to join in, and this active, physical participation helped to encourage shared views on the information being disseminated. This can be seen in the Italian barzelletta

song-type, in which the *ritornello*, or refrain, is provided by the singer at the start of the song and repeated at the end of each verse. Barzellette were irreverent songs (the word translates as ‘jest’) and so were used to mock their subjects, either in satirical songs attacking political enemies or in the execution songs of despised figures like Jews, Moors, or heinous criminals. Barzellette were also used to recount political events, especially those that celebrated one’s victories over a hated enemy. The *New Barzelletta of the Liberation of Bologna* expressed its joy at the victory of Gaston de Foix in Bologna in February 1512 during the War of the League of Cambrai by opening with the refrain:

Son Bologna liberata	I am Bologna freed
dal furor de quelli hispani	From the terror of those Spanish
qual credean cù lor mani	Who believed, with their hands
pur dhauermi sachegiata ³⁸	They would have sacked me

The potentially controversial nature of these songs can be seen in the arrest of the printer and street singer Niccolò Zoppino in March 1510 for performing and selling a barzelletta against the Venetian State in the piazza of Ferrara.³⁹ Songs with a built-in structure for audience participation seem especially suited to the mockery of their subjects, and when that subject was the governing authority the risk of prosecution was particularly high.

News-songs and moral contemplation

While the desire for information about news events fuelled the rise of official newspapers, the driving force of pamphlet culture in early modern Europe was financial, and so pamphlets and broadsides often reported on the more sensational stories that would today be considered as ‘tabloid fodder’: violent crimes and their equally gory punishments; disasters both natural and human-caused; stories of multiple births or birth deformities; and miracles, especially those witnessed by

many hundreds or even thousands of people. What differentiated pamphlets in song form from their prose counterparts was the ways in which these news items could be presented as an activity that promoted active contemplation of the news through performance and repetition, aided here especially by familiar melodies that encouraged memorisation. A good example of this is the news-sheet that reported the miraculous shower of money in Ochsenfurt in 1654:

*A new report, of what happened in Franconia on 14 March between 8 and 9 o'clock in the Marketplace of Ochsenfurt in broad daylight, as is well known silver and imperial coins fell from the air: a true report to be revealed to the Christian reader in a song.*⁴⁰

The final part of the title, that the report is 'to be revealed to the Christian reader in a song', is crucial to the recounting of the events in this format. It is through song that the message of the miracle can be learned, memorised and repeated to others – made known to non-readers of the news-sheet – in a way that is less likely with a prose account. It was imperative that news of miracles and religious beliefs was shared. In seventeenth-century Seville the conflict over the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception led to songs, or *coplas*, being printed and displayed 'on a board or card in a public place where all might read and learn them'.⁴¹ There was an active attempt made to use songs as teaching opportunities, given the didactic potential they contained. The same *coplas* were printed with an instruction manual, which provided the melody and stated that the songs had to be taught to children in school so that they could then sing them 'at home and in the street at all hours, day and night'.⁴² Similarly, the news of the nefarious activities of the local bailiff and rent-collector in Makerfield, Lancashire in 1619 was made known by the tenants in a song, and the authors were prepared 'to reade and singe the said libell as a ballate with a lowde voyce so that all the rest of the companie might heare it' and also 'taught their children and boyes to singe the same in the streets in

scoffinge manner'.⁴³ Active learning and use of news-songs was viewed as central to their purpose.

Moreover, German news-songs were often printed along with other songs on the same sheet and the song about the shower of money was no exception: following directly after the text of the first song was *A fine little penitential song / conveyed in print and placed before the eyes of all people for encouragement of good behaviour and living*.⁴⁴ Given the placement of this penitential song, the audience for the news-sheet is encouraged to view and sing the two songs together and thereby take the news event, the miracle of money raining from the sky, as a moment for contemplation of one's life and an encouragement to repent. But did the audience for these kinds of highly moralistic songs use them in the way they were intended? The vintner and self-styled prophet Hans Keil in seventeenth-century Württemberg collected broadsides and songs about all kinds of wonders and apparitions. Several broadsides were found in his home: on his bedroom door there were two, one about a sign of blood in Bohemia, another about a bleeding loaf of bread in Kempten, and another about war being the consequence for not doing penance. When asked why he had so many broadsheets and songs, Keil responded that he could mirror himself in them and prevent himself from sinning.⁴⁵

Songs could also be combined in what might be considered a type of 'early modern news medley': songs on a theme that encouraged their listeners to see separate news events as linked. Guillaume du Bartas' *The Canticle on the victory at Ivry, obtained by the King* celebrated Henri IV's recent victory over the forces of the Catholic League in March 1590 that paved the way for his subsequent siege of Paris.⁴⁶ We know it was composed immediately upon news of the victory, as du Bartas died only weeks later.⁴⁷ It was re-published in 1594, however, presumably to celebrate Henri IV's coronation, by Jean Tholosan in Lyon. Tholosan included with the song pamphlet another song in celebration of one of Henri's earlier victories, his

defeat of the Duke of Joyeuse at the battle of Coutras in October 1587. Coutras was a major news event of the Wars of Religion, a violent response by Huguenots to the revocation of the edicts that had protected them. In his song about Ivry, du Bartas evoked the memory of that previous victory:

ie ne veux pas que l'Isle
Se rempource en mes vers, que la plaine fertile
De Coutras se r'engraisse: & qu'icy de rechef
Ton glaive aille tranchant de tes haineux le chef.

I do not wish that the island
Once again runs red in my verses; I wish that the fertile plain
Of Coutras once again enriches, and that from now on
Your sword will slice through the chiefest of your enemies.

By combining the two songs in praise of the new king's earlier victories the publisher contributed to the image of Henri IV as a glorious martial leader, one who had a string of important triumphs over those who questioned his right to rule. Both songs are written in alexandrines, the twelve-syllable metre employed in French for encomiastic praise of leaders, linking the two songs stylistically as well as by topic.

One might argue that the reprinting of the songs in 1594, years after the events had taken place, changes them from 'news' to 'propaganda'. Such reprinting of a news-song is inherently linked to the emotive power that songs possessed, which could do more than simply inform the people of news events – through a combination of melody and text, songs could move them to action. The events of the French Revolution were the catalyst for thousands of contrafacta, many describing their disgust at the bloodthirstiness they witnessed, many calling for

more. One of the most gruesome episodes of the Terror has become known as the Drownings at Nantes, a series of mass executions overseen by Jean-Baptiste Carrier, the Committee for Public Safety's representative to Nantes. Between November 1793 and February 1794, Carrier ordered the mass executions of between 2-5,000 men, women and children, by drowning them from specially designed boats floating in the Loire. Finally exposed for his barbarism, at his trial Carrier defended himself by evoking the power of song: 'When I acted, the air seemed still to ring with the civic songs of twenty thousand martyrs, who had repeated, Long live the Republic! in the midst of tortures.'⁴⁸ Nevertheless, Carrier was executed by guillotine on 16 December 1794. The song about his punishment could therefore be categorised as an execution ballad, but it does not simply detail Carrier's crimes and punishment. Neither does it issue, in the manner of most other execution ballads, a warning to its listener-singers to learn from his example so as to avoid the same fate. Although the first stanza alludes to Carrier's gruesome crimes, the lyrics change from then on, as if to cast one's eyes towards events after his execution:

Mais quand du sénat, la justice	But when, by the hand of the senate,
Frappe ce tyran détesté,	Justice strikes this detested tyrant,
Doit-on différer le supplice	Should one alter the punishment
Des tyrans qui l'ont imité?	Of those tyrants who imitated him? ⁴⁹

The song asks what will happen to the other Jacobins who were responsible for similar atrocities. One by one, the remaining architects of the Terror are enumerated and a polemical demand made for their bloody executions. The violent demands of the song are reinforced by the choice of tune: the song is set to the air 'Allons enfans de la Patrie', today the national anthem of France.⁵⁰ The 'Marseillaise Hymn' was used as musical basis for scores of other songs, but its inextricable links with the watershed events of the Revolution meant that its

melody continued to carry a message of the violent overthrow of powerful, menacing tyrants into any of its new versions. This verse, for example, calls for the blood of Jean-Marie Collot d'Herbois, responsible for the executions of 2,000 people in Lyon in November 1793:

Du fer, du feu, quel assemblage	A combination of iron and fire
Frappe sans choix les Lyonnais,	Strikes the Lyonnais indiscriminately,
Collot punit par ce carnage,	Collot punishes with this carnage,
Ceux dont il souffrit les siflets;	Those whose jeers he endured;
[...]	[...]
Joins Carrier au trépas, monstre de cruauté;	Join Carrier in death, monster of cruelty;
Collot [bis] ne l'as-tu pas mieux que lui mérité.	Collot, Collot, you deserve no better than he.

The repetition of the name of each accused in the final line solidifies their place as anti-revolutionary villains, and the melody evokes for its singers both the memory of singing this song about other hated tyrants, and the memory of an idealised Republic before the Terror had destroyed its lofty goals. The tune and text stir up a heady mix of nostalgia, patriotism and anger, emotions which led to the subsequent executions of Collot d'Herbois and the others mentioned in the song.

Intriguingly, as anger at the Terroristes became increasingly radicalised, even the Marseillaise would come under attack: reactionaries complained at its public performances in 1795 that 'the song recalled the massacres of the first days of September 1792, and favored the terrorists', evidence that the memories of singing the song in the past were still vivid.⁵¹ They offered as an alternative the newly-composed 'Réveil du peuple' and got into violent skirmishes with those who continued to sing the Marseillaise. As Laura Mason notes, the debate over the

singing was over nothing less than ‘which political positions would be accorded a place in the national discourse and what the nature of French republicanism would be’.⁵² Songs and melodies could thus be politically and emotionally charged, and their cultural associations could shift over time. The emotive aspect of the combination of melody and text can be challenging for present-day historians, who must work to recover these often localized associations in order to understand the dramatic social impact of news-songs.

Conclusion

Although the itinerant and precarious nature of the profession encouraged a perception of news-singers as dubious figures, they were nevertheless primary sources of news and entertainment, to whom people from all walks of life listened, and with whom they also joined in song. Across Europe, the potentially subversive content of news-songs meant that singers and composers were subject to varying levels of scrutiny, censorship, and potential punishment, but nowhere does this seem to have reduced their appeal or ubiquity. Reliability of information was only one criterion of quality; emotion was another. News-songs were designed to move people, to sympathy, to ridicule and to religious meditation, and the greater ease by which a song could be memorized and endlessly repeated made ballads important vehicles for teaching and propaganda. By paying close attention to the complex and symbiotic relationships between composition (melody, structure and lyrics), printing (broadside, pamphlet, songbook), and performance (sellers and audience) we can understand a great deal about their reception among the populace of early modern Europe. To do this we must pay attention to balladry’s unique qualities: the conjunction of melody, text and performance could be exploited in a sophisticated way by those who needed no literacy – textual or musical – in order to do so. Therefore we must incorporate songs more actively into our histories of news – they allow us to access the manner in which citizens of all social classes,

education levels, genders and ages managed the news of the world in which they lived.

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A Caveat for Cut-purses. With a warning to all purse-carriers: Shewing the confidence of the first, and the carelessness of the last; With necessary admonitions for them both, lest the Hangman get the one, and the Begger take the other. (n.p.: W. Gilbertson, 1647-1665?)

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Ein neue Zeitung, So geschehen in Francken den 14 Martii zwischen 8. und 9. Uhr auff dem Marcktplatz zu Ochsenfurt bey hellem Tag bekantliche Silber: und Reichs Müntz von der Lufft gefallen: dem Christlichen Leser in eim Gesang waar bericht wird zu erkennen geben (n.p., 1654)

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Ich solls forthin wol anders machen:
 wil mer new Zeitung kaufen ein
 dieweil die jetzt so angnemd seyn.
 Kan sie selber tichten zu zeiten
 obs war, hat nicht vil zu bedeuten.
 Betrogen seyn wil jetzt die Welt
 Kaufen Lügen umb gutes Geld.
 Je feister Lüg, je besser Kauff,
 Das weiß gar wol der Sänger hauff.

² Pettegree, *The Invention of News*.

³ Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering*.

⁴ Fisher, ‘Song, Confession, and Criminality’, 620.

⁵ For the associations between weavers, reading, and Protestant dissent in early modern England, see Spufford, ‘The importance of religion’, 45-46.

⁶ Fisher, ‘Song, Confession, and Criminality’, 633.

⁷ ‘Chansonier dit de Maurepas’.

- ⁸ Darnton, *Poetry and the Police*, 191ff. Interrogation of Jean Le Mercier: 'Que l'hiver derner le déclarant, qui était au séminaire de St. Nicolas du Chardonnet, entendit un jour le sieur Théret, qui était alors dans le même séminaire, réciter des couplets d'une chanson contre la cour commençant par ces mots, 'Qu'une bâtarde de catin'; que le déclarant demanda ladite chanson audit sieur Théret, qui la lui donna et à laquelle le déclarant a fait quelques notes ... Ajouté le déclarant que sur la même feuille contenant ladite chanson à lui donnée par ledit sieur Théret il y avait deux pièces de vers au sujet du Prétendant, ... lesquelles deux pièces le déclarant a copiées et a déchirées dans le temps sans les avoir communiquées à personne.'
- ⁹ Darnton, *Poetry and the Police*, 169-173 'The Popularity of Tunes'.
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- ¹¹ Sabeau, *Power in the Blood*, 79.
- ¹² Salzberg and Rospocher, 'Street Singers', 15.
- ¹³ Cited in Raymond, 'Parker, Martin'.
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- ¹⁶ Oettinger, *Music as Propaganda*; McIlvenna, 'The Power of Music'.
- ¹⁷ van Orden, 'Female "Complaintes"', 838.
- ¹⁸ *Autre chanson de la ville de Chartres assiégée par le prince de Condé* in Bordeaux, *Le recueil des chansons des batailles...* (n.p.) For more on the *Wilhelmuslied* see McIlvenna, 'Ballads of Death and Disaster', 11-13.
- ¹⁹ Jonson, *Bartholomew Fair*.
- ²⁰ *The Spectator* 85, 7 June 1711.
- ²¹ Cavendish, *The Triumphant Widow*, 7.
- ²² van Orden, 'Cheap Print and Street Song'.
- ²³ *Le Rosier des chansons nouvelles*.
- ²⁴ *Sommaire de tous les recueils des Chansons*.
- ²⁵ Mercier, *Le Tableau de Paris*, 'Il y a encore les complaintes sur les pendus et les roués, que le peuple écoute la larme à l'oeil et qu'il achète avec empressement. Quand, par bonheur pour le poète du Pont-Neuf, quelque personnage illustre monte sur l'échafaud, sa mort est rimée et chantée avec le violon. Ainsi à Paris tout est matière à chanson; et quiconque, maréchal de France ou pendu, n'a pas été chansonné, a beau faire, il demeurera inconnu au peuple. Je soutiens ici que Desrues dans les carrefours de la capitale est plus illustre que Voltaire.'
- ²⁶ *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 9 July 1740.
- ²⁷ Salzberg, 'The Lyre, the Pen and the Press', 258.
- ²⁸ For English examples see Marsh, *Music and Society*, 232-3.
- ²⁹ *Old Bailey Proceedings*, 24 April 1745; 8 December 1731.
- ³⁰ For pictorial representations of these paintings see Cheesman, *Shocking Ballad Picture Show*.
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⁴⁹ *Carrier a commencé la marche.*

⁵⁰ Mason, *Singing the French Revolution*, 94-98.

⁵¹ Mason, *Singing the French Revolution*, 140.

⁵² Mason, *Singing the French Revolution*, 142.

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Author/s:

McIlvenna, U

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