

Music and song in early eighteenth-century Belfast

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ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT developments in provincial Ireland during the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was the emergence of towns. The economic expansion of the early seventeenth century, based on the extraction of raw, unprocessed materials, had not encouraged the development of an integrated marketing structure but rather had benefited the port towns.¹ By the end of the seventeenth century diversification of Irish economic structure led to more complex inter-regional trading patterns, and with that came the growth of provincial towns. By the beginning of the eighteenth century those small towns had formed into distinctive and complex regional societies. There were several markers of the emergence of these urban societies. One particularly powerful indicator was the emergence of a print culture in provincial Ireland. While there were moves in the 1640s to establish provincial presses in Waterford and Kilkenny these were motivated mainly by political necessity and they soon faltered; it was the 1720s before Waterford produced another printed work. Only Cork managed sporadically to produce printed works in the late seventeenth century and in 1694 it was joined by Belfast, reflecting the significant growth of that town in the years after 1660 and the need by Ulster Presbyterians to establish a printing press. Limerick had acquired a press by 1716 and by the 1760s there is imprint evidence for provincial presses in Derry, Strabane, Newry, Drogheda and Armagh.² A second marker of the evolution of provincial society in the early eighteenth century is the creation of centres of sociability where the middling sort might meet and display their possessions and social accomplishments for the admiration or more critical inspection of their peers. The theatre was one such obvious site of display. At first provincial towns were entertained by troupes of players from Dublin who toured Ireland, but gradually more permanent structures were created in the larger provincial towns where the local playgoers might be entertained and entertain others by their display. Cork had a purpose-built theatre by the 1730s, Waterford by the 1740s, Belfast by the 1750s and Derry perhaps by the 1770s.³ Clubs and societies of all sorts, from Freemasons to the less bibulous reading societies, spread through provincial Ireland like wildfire in the eighteenth century.⁴ Churches became places where the fashions of one's neighbours could be inspected as well as places of worship for the more conventionally devout.

¹ Raymond Gillespie, 'Small towns in early modern Ireland' in Peter Clark (ed.), *Small towns in early modern Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 161–5. ² For an overview see W.G. Wheeler, 'The spread of provincial printing in Ireland up to 1850', *Irish Booklore*, 4:1 (1978), 7–20. ³ William Smith Clark, *The Irish stage in the county towns, 1720–1800* (Oxford, 1965). ⁴ See the range of essays in James Kelly and

Belfast is no exception to these generalizations. In the late seventeenth century the town had expanded dramatically, so that by the beginning of the eighteenth century one commentator thought, wrongly, that it was the second largest town in Ireland.⁵ By the 1750s Belfast had over 8,500 souls crammed into 1,779 houses, making it the largest town in the province of Ulster.⁶ Belfast in 1750 had all the features that one might associate with a moderately prosperous regional centre. The economic infrastructure of a port with quays, customs house and warehouses was well established, and its more local trading functions were obvious in the market place, linen hall and market house. On the streets industrial activity could be smelled as well as seen in tanneries, brewing, salt manufacture, sugar boiling and rope making.⁷ From the middle of the eighteenth century new associations and societies began to emerge in Belfast, including a musical society founded in 1768.⁸ By the 1740s the Freemasons were also established in the town with two lodges and their numbers grew throughout the late eighteenth century.⁹ The establishment of the Belfast Charitable Society in 1774 provided a structure not only for the maintenance of the poor but also the provision of a burial ground (functions normally reserved for the parish church) and a water supply for the town.¹⁰ Perhaps inevitably, this voluntarism translated itself into politics with loyalist clubs being founded in the town in the 1780s and 1790s.¹¹

The emergence of what might be described as a provincial 'social scene' in early eighteenth-century Belfast clearly demanded that the residents of the town should equip themselves with the attributes and affectations of civility that proved that they were not merely the spawn of trade. This was all the more important since Belfast lacked a resident landlord who might define standards of polite behaviour since the Chichester family who owned the town then lived in England. One description of the town in 1738 noted that 'there is an Assembly kept there once a fortnight where you shall see a fine appearance of ladies and gentlemen, so trade don't always spoil politeness'.¹² This comment is of particular significance since it highlights the transition the town had made from being a functional place of trade to a centre of sociability and leisure where wealth was not just made but on display, reflecting a clear assurance of the central place of the town in its regional context.

One marker of this civility was music, the practice of which proclaimed the accomplishments of civility and the necessary wealth to support the leisure needed to master those accomplishments. In two of the earliest portraits of Belfast residents to survive, those of the families of the merchant princes Thomas Gregg and Thomas Bateson in 1762 and c.1765, music plays a prominent part. In the portrait of Gregg's

Martyn J. Powell (eds), *Clubs and societies in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2010). 5 Raymond Gillespie, *Early Belfast: the origins and growth of an Ulster town to 1750* (Belfast, 2007), pp 122, 128. 6 Raymond Gillespie and Stephen A. Royle, *Belfast: part 1 to 1840 Irish Historic Towns Atlas*, 12 (Dublin, 2003), p. 10. 7 Gillespie, *Early Belfast*, pp 128–73. 8 Roy Johnston, *Bunting's Messiah* (Belfast, 2003), pp 23–4. 9 Petri Mirala, *Freemasonry in Ulster, 1733–1813* (Dublin, 2007), pp 56–7, 70–1. 10 R.M.W. Strain, *Belfast and its charitable society* (Oxford, 1961), passim. 11 Alan Blackstock, 'Loyalist associational culture and civic identity in Belfast, 1793–1835' in Jennifer Kelly and R.V. Comerford (eds), *Associational culture in Ireland and abroad* (Dublin, 2010), pp 47–66. 12 T.G.F. Paterson (ed.), 'Belfast

family one of his daughters holds a guitar, presumably reflecting her musical accomplishments, while in that of the Bateson family one daughter holds a sheet of music while there is a music book open on a stand on the harpsichord that sits in the room. Bateson's sons, by contrast, are shown clustered around a globe, presumably reflecting the international trading achievements of their father.¹³ Mastering the technical ability to utilize these musical instruments gave rise to a minor industry of visiting teachers. In the 1750s Robert Barnes advertised in the *Belfast News Letter* that he would teach harpsichord and spinet as well as tuning instruments. Others advertised training in the fiddle, flute and French horn, and lute strings were available in one Belfast shop.¹⁴ Recreational music was clearly an important part of the classical musical tradition in Belfast. Yet music went further than being a marker of civility. For the daughters of the merchant families musical accomplishments within polite society pointed to their status in the town, but distinctly different sorts of music could be heard in other contexts. People sang in churches and on the streets as well as listening to music in the theatre and dancing to it the market house and assembly rooms. Sometimes listening to music was for the sheer pleasure of the experience. One correspondent to the *Belfast News Letter* in 1739 spoke of music as 'a soft and gentle soother of passions, quieting turbulent emotions and lulls our cares asleep. It enlivens and invigorates the fancy, it transports us, as it were, to another kind of existence and helps our imaginations with pleasure to roam beyond the confines of this terrestrial prison'.¹⁵ Music existed in a social context and, as such, it can serve as an important entry point to the world of early eighteenth-century Belfast. However, performance of such music was ephemeral and cannot be reconstructed from the surviving evidence. What can be reconstructed are the institutions that supported the varying sorts of musical performances in the town, places where music mediated between man and God and created a sense of belonging to a local community. It is on these that this essay will concentrate.

The best established and most regularly frequented institution where the inhabitants of early eighteenth-century Belfast might encounter music was the church. Belfast before 1750 was mainly a Protestant town. By 1708 it was claimed there were no more than seven Catholics in the town. By 1757 the Catholic population had grown to 550, but that was still a modest 6.5 per cent of Belfast's population. The Church of Ireland community was relatively small. In 1754 Archdeacon Pococke estimated it at sixty families, 'most of them of the lower rank', but this was probably an underestimate to judge from the baptisms in the parish register.¹⁶ Belfast in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries was predominantly Presbyterian. By 1750 there were three Presbyterian congregations, all on the Rosemary Street site. According to a list of 'catechisable persons' produced by the third Presbyterian

in 1738', *Ulster Journal of Archeology*, 3rd ser., 2 (1939), 122. ¹³ Eileen Black, *Art in Belfast, 1760–1888* (Dublin, 2006), plates 1 and 2. ¹⁴ *Belfast News Letter*, 25 Feb. 1750, 28 Sept. 1750, 4 May 1756, 16 Nov. 1756, 19 Sept. 1760, 12 June 1761. ¹⁵ *Belfast News Letter*, 20 Apr. 1739. ¹⁶ Gillespie, *Early Belfast*, pp 132–3; Raymond Gillespie and Alison O'Keeffe (eds), *Register of the parish of Shankill, Belfast*,

congregation in 1726, there were some 1,313 individuals, not including children, in that congregation alone.¹⁷ Presbyterianism had emerged slowly in Belfast. In the early seventeenth century there was no sign of Presbyterian organization in the town and it was the 1670s before a stable meeting was established there. While the Donegall family were well disposed to godly Presbyterianism, and indeed had Presbyterian chaplains in the late seventeenth century, it was politic to move slowly to avoid conflict.¹⁸

Despite these diverse origins Presbyterians were united by a style of singing in worship that focused on the psalms. Metrical Psalters were regularly imported in some quantities into Belfast from Scotland in the late seventeenth century. One merchant in 1690, for instance, shipped one 'cask' of psalm books and some other unbound books valued at £100 Scots. In some cases these imports were substantial volumes, probably intended to be owned by churches and used by precentors in worship, but in other cases they were smaller volumes that could have been owned by individuals. In 1690 one ship bound from Glasgow to Belfast contained six dozen psalm books valued at £6 Scots or 10s. sterling suggesting that this was a cheap edition at less than 2d. per volume. By contrast in the same year another merchant importing two bibles and two dozen psalm books into Belfast had them valued at £7 Scots, suggesting more substantial volumes.¹⁹ Certainly when Patrick Neill from Glasgow established his press in Belfast, possibly as early as 1694, a reprint of the Psalter of 1650 was high on the list of priorities.²⁰ Neill and later printers continued to service the market created by Presbyterian congregations in Belfast and throughout Ulster by reprinting the 1650s Psalter. On the evidence of surviving copies there were Belfast reprints of the Psalter in 1699, 1700, 1718, 1729, 1731, 1739, 1741, 1748 and 1751. The early editions were all small formats. The first two editions were duodecimo and the third, in 1718, even smaller, being 264 pages in 32° (a format only repeated in 1731), before reverting to duodecimo in 1729. These small formats were clearly intended as pocket books and because of their format were cheap and, presumably, widespread within the town. However, over time the Belfast presses, wishing to diversify their markets, began to produce the Psalter in a number of editions. If a larger format was needed, as in 1741 and 1748, double columns were used to make the most efficient use of paper. The Belfast printer James Blow's advertisement in his 1739 edition of the 1650 Psalter stipulated that 'Psalm books in several volumes' were available from his shop and they were available bound with the Bible New Testaments or the Westminster Confession. The significance of these works is further reinforced by the frequency with which they appeared in booksellers' advertisements throughout the early eighteenth century. The Psalter appears regularly in the advertisements attached to works printed by Neill, usually as the second item

1745-1761 (Dublin, 2006), pp 26-8. 17 PRONI, MIC 1P/7/2. 18 Phil Kilroy, *Protestant dissent and controversy in Ireland, 1660-1714* (Cork, 1994), pp 26, 40, 46, 55. 19 National Archives of Scotland, Edinburgh, E72/19/19, 19 June 1690; E72/19/22 29 Apr., 26 May 1690; E72/19/8 1, 2 Feb. 1683. 20 For Neill's early activities see A.S. Drennan, 'On the identification of the first Belfast printed book',

of the list after the New Testament, suggesting that it was among the more popular works produced by the press.²¹

How these Psalters were used can be only partially reconstructed. The form of worship envisaged by the Westminster divines in the *Directory* of 1644 required at least two psalms in a Sunday service, the first between the reading of the Scriptures and the sermon and the second after the prayer that followed the sermon. However, it seems that psalm singing was embraced more enthusiastically than this. According to one Ulster commentator of the 1690s a congregation might sing four or five psalms on a Sunday morning, sometimes working their way sequentially through the Psalter and at other times singing psalms relevant to the message of the sermon.²² Psalm books included neither music nor, usually, names of tunes to which they were to be sung although there was a canon of twelve common metrical tunes that could be drawn on. Nor did they cater for the illiterate. This suggests that psalm singing was a traditional activity with communal roots, tunes and words usually being passed down orally. It presupposes considerable cultural stability within Presbyterian congregations despite the volatility of the population. Such common singing linked various groups in the town; men and women, rich and poor, children and adults and clergy and laity. That does not mean that there was no room for improvement. In 1769 one teacher opening a school in the old market house advertised that he taught vocal music 'particularly psalmody'.²³ Within churches too there were structures for ensuring that congregational singing was appropriately directed. In 1715 the First Presbyterian Church had a 'singing clerk', presumably a precentor, and 'singing boys'. These were possibly drawn from the children in the school attached to the church and certainly by the 1760s this was the case.²⁴ It was, as in other places, the singing clerk who set the tempo for singing and 'lined out' the psalm, giving out the line from the Psalter before it was sung. Thus in the 1760s, the clerk of the second Belfast congregation was to instruct two others to be able to 'raise the psalm tune that in case of disposition they may supply his place on Sundays'. Not until 1806 was an organ installed in a Belfast Presbyterian church.²⁵

The power of the Scottish Psalter in eighteenth-century Belfast Presbyterianism was considerable. At one level it provided a touchstone for the liturgical tradition of the confession at a point when the various theological strains of Ulster Presbyterianism were at war in the first subscription controversy.²⁶ As one Belfast pamphlet put it in 1721, 'The Presbyterians of the north of Ireland have all along been and still are the same with the reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland; as to their whole

The Library, 7th ser., 1 (2000), 193–6. 21 Advertisements attached to Edward Pearse, *The great concern or a serious warning to a timely and thorough preparation for death* (Belfast, 1700) and Mathew Mead, *The almost Christian discovered or the false professor tried and cast* (Belfast, 1700). 22 Robert Craghead, *An answer to a late book entitled a discourse concerning the inventions of men in the worship of God* (Edinburgh, 1694), pp 22, 24. 23 *Belfast News Letter*, 4 Apr. 1769. 24 Alexander Gordon, *Historic memorials of First Presbyterian Church* (Belfast, 1877), p. 122; W.H. McCaffrey, 'The psalmody of the old congregation in Belfast, 1760–1840', *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society*, 8 (1939–42), 50–2. 25 McCaffrey, 'The psalmody of the old congregation in Belfast', 51, 53–4, 56. 26 Ian McBride, *Scripture politics*

communion having the same Confession of Faith, doctrine, worship, government and discipline and this has been the bond of a happy union among them all along'.²⁷ Thus the Belfast printer James Blow continued to produce Psalters suitable to all although he was a non-subscriber and published polemics on behalf of that party, resulting in the introduction of a more orthodox printer, Robert Gardner, about 1713. As well as providing linkages within confessional groups, styles of singing also defined confessional boundaries. In the 1690s, for example, one of the issues in the debate between William King, bishop of Derry, and his Presbyterian opponents was the style and content of singing in church since this created a sense of belonging to a particular confessional group.²⁸ On the other hand psalm singing was a very local, communal activity that bound individual congregations together. Thus when John Blow issued his 1717 Psalter a woodcut of the arms of Belfast was included on the title page, presumably to make the point that this edition was specifically for Belfast usage.²⁹

The evidence for the liturgical role of music in the Church of Ireland community in Belfast is much less abundant. That the Psalter lay at the centre of liturgical singing seems clear. The 1731 edition by James Blow of Mathew Mead's *The almost Christian discovered or the false professor tried and cast* also contained advertisements for 'Psalters with the addition of morning and evening prayer' and 'Select psalms for the use of the parish church', which would appear to be a modified form of the Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady Psalter of 1696 that was in standard use in the Church of Ireland by this date. Anxious to maximize his market, Blow also offered the Bible bound with the Psalter, either English or Scottish, or the Prayer Book, but such a volume must have been too unwieldy to carry to church. Perhaps significantly, these Church of Ireland works came some way below the Scottish Psalter in the list of books available, suggesting that they were less popular purchases. Nevertheless all these were still on offer in the advertisement attached to James Blow's reprint of the metrical psalms in 1739. It is unclear whether the Church of Ireland parish church had an organ in the early seventeenth century to assist singing of the psalms. Certainly organs were becoming more common in Dublin parish churches in the late seventeenth century, but whether this practice was imitated outside the capital is unclear.³⁰ In Belfast there is no clear evidence for an organ in the parish church until the early 1780s, when an organ was installed in the rebuilt parish church and William Ware, who had been trained in Armagh, was recruited as parish organist.³¹

Religious music was not, of course, confined to churches. Psalms were used in other contexts. All the Belfast editions of the metrical psalms stipulated that they were

(Oxford, 1998), pp 39–52. 27 Samuel Dunlop, *An account of the mind of the synod at Belfast 1721. In short a reply to Mr Dugud's remarks upon their declaration* (Belfast, 1721), p. 1. 28 Denise Neary, 'Seventeenth-century Irish parish church music' in Barra Boydell and Kerry Houston (eds), *Music, Ireland and the seventeenth century* (Dublin, 2009), pp 172–5; Raymond Gillespie, "'A good and Godly exercise': singing the word in Irish dissent, 1660–1701" in Kevin Herlihy (ed.), *Propagating the word of Irish dissent, 1650–1800* (Dublin, 1998), pp 37–8. 29 Gillespie, "'A good and Godly exercise'", pp 25–30. In Scotland, Aberdeen had its own version of the Psalter for local use, see David Johnson, *Music and society in lowland Scotland in the eighteenth century* (2nd ed., Edinburgh, 2003), pp 167–9. 30 Neary, 'Seventeenth-century Irish parish church music', pp 176–9. 31 Johnston, *Bunting's Messiah*, pp 17–18.

'appointed to be sung in congregations and families'. How common family worship was in Belfast is unknown, but certainly booksellers' advertisements from the 1740s suggest that John Howe's six sermons on the necessity of family religion and worship were available in the town to urge people in this direction. For this sort of activity alternatives to the Psalter were available by the mid-eighteenth century. In 1750 James Magee issued his selections from John and Charles Wesley's *Hymns and sacred poems*. This cannot have been for the use of a nascent Methodist community in the town since Wesley did not visit Belfast until 1756, though further visits followed in 1758, 1760, 1762, 1769, 1771, 1778, 1787 and 1789 and the first Methodist chapel was established in Fountain Street in 1787.³² Astute readers of the *Belfast News Letter* were aware of the existence of the movement well before this, since its activities were well reported in the London columns of that newspaper. Clearly Wesley's work was produced not with a liturgical tradition in mind, but rather for use in domestic worship. Again Samuel Wilson and James Magee's 1744 reprint of John Willison's *The afflicted man's companion* contained an advertisement for Isaac Watts, *Divine songs attempted in easy language for the use of children*, which is presumably an edited version of his popular *Hymns and spiritual songs*, at 3d. The work was clearly popular and appeared in another advertisement in Magee's 1746 reprint of John Taylor's *The scripture doctrine of original sin proposed*. Wilson and Magee's 1744 advertisement also contained a recommendation for *True Christian love. To be sung with any of the common tunes of the Psalms* aimed at a popular market since it was priced at 1d. These works were clearly not intended for liturgical worship, though drawing on popular psalm tunes, which would at least create associations between worship and the new songs, and were more likely intended to be sung at family worship.

Over the early eighteenth century religious music in Belfast diversified from its strictly confessional contexts. The rise of hymnody provided a more accommodating musical space where confessions could mingle. One indication that this was so occurred in 1742 when the Belfast printer Francis Joy issued a rather unusual volume entitled *The psalms of David in metre* and it was republished in 1759. Yet this was not a straight reprint of the Scottish Psalter of 1650 as the title might suggest; rather it was a new collection of psalm translations, mostly of recent date. It drew on the standard Anglican liturgical translation of Nahum Tate and Nicholas Brady, the translation of the psalms by Isaac Watts (*The psalms of David*) published in 1719 and that of John Patrick (*A century of select psalms*) published in 1679. It also used translations by Sir Richard Blackmore published in 1721, which were 'allowed and permitted to be used in all churches', and those of Sir John Denham. In addition it included twenty-six sacramental hymns, which suggests that it was not entirely designed for private devotional use. The preface hints that it was intended for 'divine worship' and urged that congregations would attempt 'singing without reading the lines [since this] will be a great advantage to both the harmony and sense'. It would be easy to dismiss this as an entirely Church of Ireland product and indeed many of

³² George Benn, *A history of the town of Belfast* (Belfast, 1877), pp 419–23.

that confession may well have used it. However, there are traces of non-conformist influence also. Some of the psalms in the volume were drawn from the godly William Barton translation of the psalms that had been published on a number of occasions in Dublin in the 1690s and may well have been used in Presbyterian congregations there.³³ Some of the hymns in the volume are drawn from the work of a Baptist, Joseph Stennet, entitled *Hymns in commemoration of the suffering of our blessed saviour Jesus Christ, composed for the celebration of his Holy supper* (London, 1697) with a decidedly low view of the sacrament. The remaining sacramental hymns were drawn from *Sacramental hymns* by the Dublin Presbyterian minister Joseph Boyse published in 1693.³⁴ It may be that some of the Belfast Presbyterian congregations used at least some of this work in their worship, and perhaps especially at Communion. A liturgical context is also possible for the four hymns and five psalms printed in a work on liturgy from an Anglican context reprinted in Belfast in 1741.³⁵ If so, it suggests that the sort of music being used in religious context was changing and the congregational experience of music, perhaps influenced by their musical experiences elsewhere, was becoming more diversified and affective.

Music was not monopolized by the churches and the early eighteenth century saw a rise in convivial music making. One of the marks of the emergence of 'polite society' in provincial towns of the early eighteenth century was the rise of an associational culture. Music was often a central part of that. Perhaps the most important centre of sociability in early eighteenth-century Belfast was the market house, located at the junction of High Street and Cornmarket. In 1776 the market house was supplanted by the construction of new Assembly Rooms by the earl of Donegall in the upper storey of the recently built Exchange, at the bottom of Donegall Street, which the earl was promoting as the new fashionable centre of the city. However, before the creation of the Assembly Rooms, polite society gathered in the market house for an annual ball in the early eighteenth century to mark the king's birthday and for celebrations of military victories. The birth of an heir to the earl of Donegall in 1739 was marked by feasting and drinking. Dancing was a frequent enough pastime in the town to support a dancing master by 1739.³⁶ By the 1730s such balls were regular occurrences. The market house also provided a concert space of sorts by the middle of the eighteenth century. In 1750 a party of professional musicians gave concerts in the market house, and other concerts were advertised through the 1750s.³⁷ On 15 June 1750 a number of singers, possibly attached to the theatre, advertised that they would sing in the assembly rooms in Belfast, then located in the Market House. The repertoire of Dublin musical life might affect what was performed in Belfast, as in other fashionable areas of the town's life, but it did not

33 Gillespie, "A good and Godly exercise", p. 38. 34 *Ibid.*, pp 30–45. 35 *A Christian liturgy or a devout and rational form of worship* (Belfast, 1741), pp 79–89. 36 Benn, *History*, p. 590; J.R.R. Adams, 'A "Directory" of Belfast c.1740', *North Irish Roots*, 4:2 (1993), 19. Another dancing master from Dublin announced his intention to set up in the town but he does not seem to have stayed long, moving to Coleraine within a month, *Belfast News Letter*, 23 June 1739, 31 July 1739. 37 Johnston, *Bunting's Messiah*, p. 23. Concerts also began in Glasgow, with which Belfast had strong trading connections, in

determine it entirely.³⁸ The three works advertised were all from Handel's 'Acis and Galatae', first composed in 1732 and from the mid-1730s a concert favourite in Dublin, with over fifteen performances known before 1750.³⁹ Singing and instrumental concerts might also take place during balls between dancing.⁴⁰ At another ball on 26 November 1756 a Mr Vincent was to sing 'several favourite songs' between dances. Vincent would sing four songs: 'Cymon and Iphegenia', 'From the silent grove', 'Tis a twelvemonth ago' and 'God save King George'. While Thomas Arne's arrangements of 'God save King George' of 1745 was universally sung, more daring was Arne's 'Cymon and Iphegenia', just composed in 1753 and unperformed in Dublin, although the score was available from the music publishers there in 1754.⁴¹ Despite this lack of metropolitan approval this proved a popular programme and the entire experience was repeated at a ball a week later, even though the entrance fee was a hefty half a crown thus imposing a social barrier to this world of music making.⁴²

If the market house was the location of choice for many to display their position in society, that was complemented by the emergence of the theatre in Belfast. It seems likely that some form of theatre was established in Belfast by 1731 but references to performances are sporadic until the late 1750s. The theatrical entertainment comprised more than just acting. Singing and dancing between the acts was common.⁴³ By the middle of the eighteenth century the ballad opera arrived in Belfast, having been popular in Dublin for some time previously. 'The Beggar's Opera' seems first to have been performed in Belfast in the 1754–5 season, some years after its first performance in Dublin in 1731. It continued to be performed regularly in the capital into the 1750s.⁴⁴ However, the stage and its music spilled out into the streets through print. In 1741, for instance, Samuel Willson and James Magee advertised that among the books they had for sale was *The honest Yorkshire man: a ballad farce* and it reappeared in an advertisement of 1755 in Magee's reprint of A. Hills, *The walking statue*. 'The honest Yorkshire man' had been popular in Dublin in the 1730s but is not known to have been staged in Belfast before 1753. The printed text, together with its ballads, made this music available in the town and songs from it may have been sung here without it being staged.⁴⁵ Perhaps even more influential was Allan Ramsay's ballad opera 'The gentle shepherd', first composed in Edinburgh in 1721, which was re-printed in Belfast in 1743, 1748 and 1755.

In addition to the theatre and market house, clubs and societies served as meeting places at which wealth and manners could be displayed. Of these groups the most

the mid-1740s, see Johnson, *Music and society in lowland Scotland*, p. 44. 38 For example a stay maker advertised riding habits and stays 'as neat and fashionable as any made in Dublin', torches for funerals were 'as good as any made in Dublin' and a woollen draper furnished his shop from Dublin, *Belfast News Letter*, 23, 27, 20 Mar. 1739, 4 Mar. 1739/40. 39 *Belfast News Letter*, 15 June 1750; Brian Boydell, *A Dublin musical calendar, 1700–1760* (Dublin, 1988), pp 58, 76, 77, 88, 106, 108, 115, 119, 121, 123, 131, 132, 139, 142, 144. Reports of musical events in London and Dublin occur in the *Belfast News Letter*, for example 9 Jan 1738/9, 1 May 1739, 12 Jan 1749/50, 6 Nov. 1750. 40 *Belfast News Letter*, 12 June, 15 June, 4 Sept., 7 Sept. 1750. 41 Boydell, *A Dublin musical calendar*, p. 194. 42 *Belfast News Letter*, 23 Nov. 1756, 30 Nov. 1756. 43 John C. Greene, *Theater in Belfast, 1736–1800* (London, 2000), pp 47, 55, 57, 60. 44 Greene, *Theater in Belfast*, p. 55. 45 Samuel Colvil, *The Whiggs supplication to the Scotch*

important in a Belfast context were Freemasons, who were established in the town by the 1740s. Masons might experience music in many contexts. There were certainly Masonic services in the parish church in the 1780s where religious music might be heard in a specifically Masonic context.⁴⁶ Music at lodge meetings was also a pleasant way of passing time after dinner. In 1764 the Belfast printer James Magee reissued the fifth edition of *A pocket companion for free-masons*, approved and recommended by the Grand Lodge. This contained 'A collection of songs of the Masons both old and new' and had clearly been available in the town for some time, since it was advertised in James Magee's 1755 edition of A. Hill's farce *The walking statue; or, The devil in the wine cellar*. This contained some twenty-one songs that celebrated Masonry, some retailing the history and purpose of the mystery from the Creation to the present, while others were more whimsical. Many had popular tunes named to accompany them, including one taken from 'The Beggar's Opera'. That these were intended to be sung at meetings is made clear in text specifying that there were for 'after business' or at the 'grand feast' and the inclusion of choruses suggests that this was for communal singing.⁴⁷ The songs in the pocket companion may well have proved so popular that Magee, spotting a gap in the market for a more compact product for after dinner entertainment, may have issued them as the *A choice collection of songs for Free Masons* that appears in the advertisement attached to his *The vintner trick'd* of 1766.

A final institution that may have supported and encouraged music making was the schools. Belfast had a number of schools in the early eighteenth century, including those sponsored by Lord Donegall and the Presbyterian church, feeding their products into Trinity College, Dublin and the Scottish universities. However there were certainly smaller institutions, including one charity school. It is highly likely that such schools might teach music even at the level of the metrical psalms, which were morally uplifting as well as technically easy to master. The Belfast presses produced a number of schoolbooks including *The youth's instructor*, which appeared in 1758, described as being 'for schools and private families'. This included stories, fables, prayers and graces, maxims for a good life and examples of wonders from around the world. Also included were thirteen songs all selected from Thomas Foxtton's *Moral songs composed for the use of children* (London, 1725).⁴⁸ Some of these were little more than pastoral poems but most had moral meanings. The message of 'The dangers of misspending time' is clear, but less obvious is the instruction that one should not be ensnared by pleasure or mirth encoded in 'The angler's reflection'. No tunes were given for any of these songs; and if they were used in Belfast schools well-known local tunes or even psalm tunes were presumably deployed to ensure that the moral messages were remembered. Arising from this there are signs of the emergence of a

Hudibras (Belfast, 1741), advertisement; Boydell, *A Dublin musical calendar*, pp 60, 65, 133, Greene, *Theater in Belfast*, p. 47. 46 Johnston, *Bunting's Messiah*, pp 13–14. 47 *A pocket companion for free-masons* (Belfast, 1764), pp 41–81. 48 *The youth's instructor* (Belfast, 1758), pp 26–37. For a later example of the same see J.R.R. Adams, *The printed word and the common man: popular culture in Ulster, 1700–1900*

musical profession in Belfast. In the 1720s the funeral register of the First Presbyterian Church mentions two fiddlers and a musician. In 1728 another fiddler was sworn free of the town, suggesting that this was seen as a trade in its own right and not simply supporting popular entertainment in the streets or taverns.⁴⁹ Clearly Belfast was generating enough wealth to support those who might play music for profit. In addition these local performers could be supplemented by strolling musicians who visited the town on a more erratic basis.⁵⁰

The making of music and singing was not confined to houses, theatres or other public assemblies, but spilled out onto the streets and into taverns and alehouses. Music was a cheap, accessible and expressive pastime. Popular gatherings were often associated with music, as in 1756 when the weavers presented the former sovereign of the town with a silver bowl, the preceding ceremony having 'a very genteel appearance with drums beating and colours flying'.⁵¹ We are heavily dependent on printed ballad sheets to uncover the sort of popular works that were sung on the streets of Belfast and the surrounding area. Since the Belfast press only issued works in English there is no evidence for songs in Irish being sung in the town. Given the sporadic occurrence of Irish surnames in the town, it may be that very few of these songs were performed. That printed ballad sheets in English existed is clear from printer's advertisements. James Blow, for instance, in his 1731 edition of Mathew Mead's *The almost Christian discovered; or, The false professor tried and cast*, advertised that he had in stock 'above an hundred and eighty sorts of small pamphlets, garlands and ballads'. However, the survival rate of these sheets is very poor since most were cheap and were probably worn out by being passed from hand to hand. Again many may have circulated in manuscript, scribbled on scraps of paper by those who saw a printed sheet or heard the words sung. Poor survival rates of such pieces of ephemera present one problem; another uncertainty concerns the sort of controls that were exercised on the Belfast printers by clergy and others as to what was suitable for the press. At the 1719 Presbyterian General Synod meeting in Belfast it was resolved that 'complaint having been made that there are several obscene ballads printed in Belfast and dispers'd through the country, the moderator desir'd Mr Kirkpatrick [the minister of Second Belfast] to represent to the printers, that the minister and several other godly persons take just offence at these ballads and therefore advise them not to print such papers in the future'.⁵² What these 'obscene ballads' were, or how obscene they actually were, is not known since none appears to have survived. Ballad sheets came from a number of sources. Before the arrival of a printing press in Belfast in the 1690s such ballad sheets had to be imported. In the 1680s ballad sheets were certainly being imported from Glasgow and other ports on the west coast of Scotland into Belfast.⁵³ It may well be that this trade was more widespread than the references to

(Belfast, 1987), p. 19, in which local hymns were added to the London text. ⁴⁹ Jean Agnew (ed.), *Funeral register of the First Presbyterian Church of Belfast* (Belfast, 1995), pp 17, 25, 37; R.M. Young (ed.), *The town book of the corporation of Belfast* (Belfast, 1892), p. 290. ⁵⁰ For example the harper in *Belfast News Letter*, 16 Feb. 1738/9. ⁵¹ Benn, *History*, p. 344. The silver bowl is now in the Ulster Museum, Belfast. ⁵² *Records of the General Synod of Ulster* (3 vols, Belfast, 1890–8), i, p. 479. ⁵³ National Archives of

ballad sheets in the port books suggest, since many may be concealed under the more general port book rubric of 'pamphlets' or 'printed paper in sheets' that appears in some entries. The English port books are rather less informative about what printed ballad sheets may have been circulating in Belfast, but it is difficult to believe that English ballads were not being imported in the way that Scottish ones were. Certainly from the 1740s, when booksellers' advertisements are more revealing about what may have circulated in terms of locally printed songs, material of English provenance was available in the town. Robin Hood ballads, for instance, appear in booksellers lists of 1744, 1758 and 1764, being described as 'Robin Hood's 24 songs' priced at 4d.⁵⁴ Such ballads had certainly existed in England since the late fifteenth century and by the late seventeenth century were circulating in chap book and ballad form. Given their eighteenth-century presence in Belfast booksellers' advertisements, it seems likely that they were already an established tradition through imports by this date.⁵⁵

Clearer evidence of the circulation of English and Scottish ballads in Belfast is provided by the existence of local reprints of song books in the early eighteenth century. *A select collection of English songs*, complete with the names of the tunes to which they were to be sung, and a number of Scottish songs appeared in the town in 1751, introducing Belfast residents to fashionable songs from elsewhere. More important were cheap song books or 'garlands' that contained songs, often derived from popular English songs as well as some known from the repertoire in Ireland. These became particularly common in the 1760s when the printer James Magee issued a number of them but they existed in the town well before this.⁵⁶ Samuel Willson's and James Magee's 1744 reprint of John Willison's *The afflicted man's companion* contained an advertisement for a three-part work entitled *The triumph of wit*. The first part was a style book for letters 'in the most elegant style' for those wooing ladies, the second comprised a collection of 'witty jests, puns and bulls', while the third contained the art of canting (sign language). It was 'illustrated with poems, songs and various intrigues'. Priced at 6d., this was not a cheap book but presumably worth the investment for some, and it reappeared in a 1755 advertisement in James Magee's edition of A. Hill's farce *The walking statue; or, The devil in the wine cellar* and again in a 1766 advertisement in Magee's *The vintner trick'd*. Popular works such as this gathered imitators and a similar work, *A new academy of compliments*, was also advertised by Magee in 1755. This promised advice on the art of courtship, sign language and the interpretation of dreams, all with 'a choice collection of above eighty favourite love songs, merry catches and jovial healths, being the newest now extant. With plain instructions for dancing'. Song books became a commonplace among the stock of Belfast printers and booksellers. A 1755 advertisement in James Magee's edition of A. Hill's farce *The walking statue; or, The devil in the wine cellar* offered *The*

Scotland, Edinburgh, E72/20/7, 5 June 1682; Benn, *History of Belfast*, p. 316. 54 J.R.R. Adams, 'The Robin Hood ballads in Ulster', *Ulster Folklife*, 34 (1988), 79–82. 55 For the later tradition see J.C. Holt, *Robin Hood* (London, 1989), pp 162–77. 56 Adams, *The printed word and the common man*, pp 33–4;

goldfinch, a collection of celebrated new songs some of which were never printed before, to which is added a select collection of above one hundred English and Scots songs. Priced at 6d. it was clearly aimed at the more affluent song purchaser but it gained some purchase in the market since it appears in another Magee advertisement of 1766 in his edition of *The vintner trick'd*.

Evidence for locally composed ballads is much thinner, since most were probably never committed to print. However it is clear that local ballads were composed and, in one case, printed. In an eight-page 'garland' issued by James Magee in Belfast in 1769 there is a song entitled 'William Montgomery's last farewell' relating the story of a man executed on Belfast in 15 April 1738, which suggests that it had been in circulation for some time.⁵⁷ The twenty-one verses relate the story of Montgomery, a Presbyterian who had come to Belfast from Co. Londonderry aged fourteen and eventually established himself as an ale-house keeper. Falling into debt he became bankrupt, but set up in business again and fell into bad company with smugglers who stayed at his inn while engaged in smuggling horses and other stolen goods into Scotland. He was caught in their company and hanged for being implicated in their crime, which he denied.⁵⁸ The ballad is cast in the form of a moral tale of an innocent brought up in the fear of God. Lawful dealing ensured that 'the Lord so blest my store', a sentiment often echoed in Belfast wills of the early eighteenth century.⁵⁹ Perhaps inevitably, he was corrupted by the avarice of town life; the last verses of the ballad protest the innocence of his wife and present a confession of his sins: 'Now come, sweet Lord, I humbly pray,/ and wash me in thy blood;/ Then shall my tongue eternally/ thy praises sing aloud'. The literary model for this ballad was the gallows speech, which found increasing popularity with printers in the early eighteenth century.⁶⁰ From the 1690s these cheap single-sheet productions from the Dublin presses became part of the theatre of execution, in which the criminal told his story on the gallows before execution and confessed his sins and begged for mercy. All this satisfied the prurient interest of the reader and provided moral lessons as to the fate of those who indulged in criminal activity. Other ballads besides that of William Montgomery followed the form of a 'gallows speech'.⁶¹ That such stories were common and circulated in a number of ways is suggested by the gallows speech of James Dunbar of Carrickfergus who, in his final words, thanked God for 'those learned gentlemen, the clergy of the presbytery of the town of Belfast etc, who was pleased to remember me in their public service, joined with their congregations on Sunday last'.⁶² It seems highly probable that such remembrances were accompanied by an exposition of the sort of moral lessons contained in the ballad of Montgomery. In a 1703 variant of the same theme, the Belfast printer Patrick Neill produced

Hugh Shields, *Narrative singing in Ireland* (Dublin, 1993), pp 46–7. 57 Edited in Shields, *Narrative singing*, pp 221–5. 58 For a Belfast reprint of a work originally published in Dublin against smuggling see Jasper Brett, *The sin of with-holding tribute by running of goods, concealing excise, etc, addressed to the trading part of this nation* (Belfast, 1707). 59 For examples see PRONI, D/4204/B/2/1; D/1184; D/3095/B/2/4, 5. 60 James Kelly, *Gallows speeches from eighteenth-century Ireland* (Dublin, 2001). 61 Kelly, *Gallows speeches*, pp 66–7. 62 Kelly, *Gallows speeches*, p. 181.

another set of moral tales, warning the inhabitants of the town of the dangers of drunkenness, swearing and uncleanness for which they might be struck down by God's judgment.⁶³ Again in 1750 a Belfast printer advertised a moral account of the last days of a condemned man.⁶⁴ In such ways did music, print and speech interact to reinforce each other on the streets of early eighteenth-century Belfast.

While individual ballads are important, few learned or sang songs in isolation. However, a brief glimpse into the sort of song repertoire of those in and around Belfast in the early eighteenth century is afforded by a 1795 Belfast pamphlet entitled *Popular ballads written in the middle of the last and the commencement of the present century*. These were, according to the subtitle, 'preserved in the memory of a departed friend', thus vouching for their oral origin. This does not appear to be a reprint of a work published elsewhere, and may be taken as an original Belfast production. It contains eight ballads, all with the names of the tunes to which they were to be sung. Most of these derive from a Scottish tradition, probably learnt from imported ballad sheets, and reflect the significant political crises of the early eighteenth century that would have generated broadsheets and interest in conveying information. The first three deal with the 1715 rising and its aftermath, narrating the events of the rising, one urging Presbyterian resistance to the Catholicism of the Jacobites in colourful, rather apocalyptic language urging 'But at the door keep Babel's whore'. The next two songs, which appear to have an English provenance, are essentially protestations of loyalty to the Hanoverians, while the next two deal with war from the popular perspective of the soldier. Finally, there is an anti-Catholic song from Scotland that praises the Covenant; given the frequency with which the Covenant was reprinted by Belfast printers, this is certainly a song to raise echoes with local Presbyterians. At one level these songs preserved a version of the past that could be adapted to present needs. At another level they provided a way of verbalizing attitudes that were otherwise difficult to articulate at popular level. Loyalty to the crown was a key principle of Presbyterian political organization, articulated by ministers in substantial treatises published in Belfast.⁶⁵ However these were difficult texts in terms of cost, ideas and the time it took to read them. Perhaps more digestible were sermons that conveyed the same messages of loyalty from the Presbyterian pulpit, and were subsequently printed in Belfast, though here again attention could wander.⁶⁶ Songs of loyalty, however, were instantly accessible to all even without a philosophical context for their beliefs and could be effectively used to demonstrate Presbyterian

63 *Dreadful warnings with seasonable advice to atheists and blasphemers of God's holy name* (Belfast, 1703). It may not be fanciful to link this with the desire for moral reformation pursued by the Societies for the Reformation Manners in Dublin and in which some Ulster Presbyterian clergy were involved; see T.C. Barnard, 'Reforming Irish manners: the religious societies in Dublin during the 1690s', in his *Irish Protestant ascents and descents, 1641–1770* (Dublin, 2004), pp 143–78. 64 *Belfast News Letter*, 1 Oct. 1750. 65 For example James Kirkpatrick, *An historical essay upon the loyalty of Presbyterians in Great Britain and Ireland* ([Belfast], 1713). 66 For example John Abernethy, *The people's choice, the Lord's anointed: a thanksgiving sermon for his most excellent majesty King George his happy accession to the throne, his arrival, and coronation, preached at Antrim, October 27, 1714* (Belfast, 1714).

loyalty. What this group of Belfast songs suggests is that music on the streets embraced politics, religion and everyday life, and created interactions between these areas in a popular way that could be circulated within the town and in the process shape ideas and attitudes. Moreover, that such songs could be passed down and added to for almost a century before appearing in print suggests a well-developed process of social transmission of music that implies a measure of social and cultural stability in Belfast, notwithstanding the high levels of population mobility in the town.

In 1700 the main venues in which Belfast people might experience music were in their churches and on the streets, as ballads from Scotland and England might be sung to provide local entertainment. Such ballads had a function wider than simple entertainment. Singing created different types of community in an unstable world with a highly mobile population. Congregations were bound together by psalm singing while families might be united in singing at family worship. Confessions, on the other hand, might be separated by singing styles. Ballads drew together political and moral communities since they allowed the articulation of sometimes complex ideas that were difficult to formulate in normal contexts but were easier to express through the medium of borrowed songs. Loyalty to the crown and anti-Catholicism were both shaped by these songs and, in turn, shaped them. In the 1740s and 1750s a new range of institutions emerged at which music might be encountered, principally the theatre and the Assembly rooms. Other forms of popular sociability, such as the rise of Freemasonry, also provided venues for music making, but this probably affected fewer people. It may not be coincidental that it is at this point that psalmody, which had hitherto dominated worship, may have been supplemented by hymns, and the first widespread evidence for song books, either for schools or as 'garlands', appears. Classical, church and popular music all interacted within the same cultural framework. All this affected the musical sensibilities of the town. The rise of the hymn in worship reflects changing musical tastes that resulted from the exposure of worshippers to other types of music. That exposure to the music of the theatre and assembly room, in turn, reflects the emergence of a Belfast provincial elite concerned with the sort of sociability and display required by their new found position as not merely a trading town but as a cultural centre in its own right. In this process music lies at the centre of the emergence of such a robust provincial culture.