

Musical Victorians: The Social Life of Sound in Nineteenth-Century British Literature

In 1914, the German critic Oscar Adolf Hermann Schmitz disparaged Victorian England as “Das Land Ohne Musik” (“the land without music”). Schmitz’s statement reflects the attitudes of many nineteenth-century – and even modern-day – thinkers, who viewed Victorian Britain as a world of musical amateurs and philistines, especially compared to the musical powerhouses of nineteenth-century Germany and Italy.

However, literary critics and musicologists have recently begun to uncover the presence of a rich musical culture in Victorian England. Beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, advances in industry, technology, and transportation enabled Britons – particularly those in the middle and upper classes – to enjoy more time for leisure activities and greater access to cultural centers. As a result, concert going emerged as a wildly popular pastime. Chamber music performances such as the Classical Chamber Concerts, organized by English composer Sterndale Bennett, brought the music of the Victorian parlor to the wider public. Soon, professional orchestras and opera companies arose throughout the country; the period from 1855 to 1904 witnessed the emergence of the New Philharmonic Society, Saturday Concerts Orchestra, Royal Italian Opera, and the London Symphony Orchestra, as well as professional orchestras in Manchester and Leeds. The public demand for musical concerts spurred the construction of theaters, opera houses, and concert halls as well as the establishment of music conservatories.

In this class, we explore literary depictions of this burgeoning musical world. We will consider music’s appearance as a symbol, metaphor, and image in Victorian literature, but also consider moments in which its role goes beyond the figurative. In addition to exploring nineteenth-century philosophical and scientific debates about music, we will also investigate music’s connections to broader issues of class, gender, race, and sexuality in Victorian culture. How did the emerging musical culture enable new understandings of human life? How did Victorian writers translate the art of music into their written prose? What might our study of the connections between the arts in the nineteenth century tell us about interdisciplinarity today?

ASSIGNMENTS

“Concertgoing” exercise: As BU students, you are all entitled to a free Boston Symphony Orchestra (BSO) “College Card,” which entitles you to free tickets to BSO concerts. (You may pick up this card at the Student Arts office). For this class, you must choose **at least one concert** to attend at Symphony Hall **during the first month of the semester**. After you attend the concert, you will write a short reflection (approx. three pages, double-spaced) about your experience. While you may comment on the music itself, I mostly want you to focus on the *social experience* of concertgoing. How did audience members behave? What were people wearing? What were some social habits and customs you noticed? What surprised you about the experience of concertgoing? In class, we will discuss the nineteenth-century origins of many of these concertgoing practices and explore their representations in literature.

Papers: You will also write two papers for this class – one in the middle of the term (5-7 pages) and one at the end (10-12 pages). The **first paper** will ask you to conduct a close-reading of one

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of our course texts and compose an original argument about the author’s use of music in the work. The **second paper** will ask you to conduct historical, primary source research – a skill we will practice in class – on an aspect of nineteenth-century musical culture that will inform your argument about a different course text. For example, you might explore historical writing on female opera singers to analyze Alcharisi in *Daniel Deronda*, or you might research the developments in musical technology that inform the writings of Joyce. I will provide more detailed assignment sheets closer to the deadline.

Discussion participation and class engagement: Since this course is a discussion-based seminar, your regular attendance and participation are essential both to your own learning and to your classmates’ learning. Under ordinary circumstances, missing more than *three days of class* will automatically lower your final grade by one-third of a letter grade for each additional class missed. Missing more than *five classes* may lead to a failing grade in the course. Note that these absences need not be consecutive. If you have a special obligation that will require you to miss several classes (e.g., varsity athletics, religious observances), please talk with me at the beginning of the semester. Exceptional circumstances will be handled on a case-by-case basis.

COURSE MATERIALS

Hardy, Thomas. *Under the Greenwood Tree*. 1872. Ed. Simon Gatrell. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985. ISBN: 978-0199697205.

Eliot, George. *Daniel Deronda*. 1876. Ed. Terence Cave. London: Penguin Classics, 1995. ISBN: 978-0140434279.

Note: all other readings will be available on our course Blackboard site.

SCHEDULE OF READINGS

Week One: The “Land Without Music”

- Ruth Solie, “No ‘Land Without Music’ After All” (*Victorian Literature and Culture*, 2004)
- Emily Auerbach, “Das Land Ohne Musik” (from *Maestros, Dilettantes, and Philistines*)

Week Two: Musical Idealism

- Emma Sutton, “Commercialism and Consumerism” (from *Aubrey Beardsley and British Wagnerism in the 1890s*)
- G.W.F. Hegel, from *Lectures on Fine Art*
- E.T.A. Hoffmann, from *Musical Writings*
- William Wordsworth, “On the Power of Sound”
- Percy Shelley, “To a Skylark”

Week Three: Beyond Idealism – Physiological Aesthetics

- Herbert Spencer, “The Origin and Function of Music”
- Grant Allen, from *Physiological Aesthetics*

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-Walter Pater, from *The Renaissance*

Week Four: Musical Poetics

- Robert Browning, “A Toccata of Galuppi’s”
- Browning, “The Pied Piper of Hamelin”
- Algernon Charles Swinburne, “Music: An Ode”

Week 5: Music, Class, and Community

- Thomas Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Preface-Part Two)
- Emily Auerbach, from *Maestros, Dilettantes, and Philistines: The Musician in the Victorian Novel*

Week 6: Music, Class, and Community (cont.)

- Hardy, *Under the Greenwood Tree* (Part Three-end)
- Hardy, “Haunting Fingers: A Phantasy in a Museum of Musical Instruments”

Week 7: Music and Gender

- Jane Austen, from *Persuasion*
- Hardy, “The Chapel-Organist”
- Paula Gillett, “Music and the Female Sphere” (from *Musical Women in England, 1870-1914*)

Week 8: Music and Gender (cont.)

****PAPER ONE DUE****

- George Eliot, *Armgart*
- Rosemarie Bodenheimer, “Ambition and Its Audiences: George Eliot’s Performing Figures” (from *Victorian Studies*, 2012)
- Eliot, from *The Mill on the Floss*
- Phyllis Weliver, “George Eliot: Melody, Evolution, and Aesthetics” AND “Recapitulation and Natural Selection in *The Mill on the Floss*” (from *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*)

Week 9: Music, Race, and Ethnicity

- Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Books I and II)
- Weliver, “Sexual Selection and Music: *Middlemarch* and *Daniel Deronda*” (from *Women Musicians in Victorian Fiction*)

Week 10: Music, Race, and Ethnicity (cont.)

- Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Books III and IV)
- Delia da Sousa Correa, “*Daniel Deronda*: ‘The Other Side of Silence’” (from *George Eliot, Music, and Victorian Culture*)

Week 11: Music, Race, and Ethnicity (cont.)

- Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Books V and VI)
- Sarah Gracombe, “Converting Trilby: Du Maurier on Englishness, Jewishness, and Culture.” (*Nineteenth-Century Literature*, 2003)

Week 12: Music, Race, and Ethnicity (cont.)

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-Eliot, *Daniel Deronda* (Books VII and VIII)

Week 13: Music, Race, and Ethnicity (cont.)

-George Du Maurier, from *Trilby*

-Jonathan Freedman, “The Mania of the Middlebrow: *Trilby*, the Jew, and the Middlebrow Imaginary” (from *The Temple of Culture: Assimilation and Anti-Semitism in Literary Anglo-America*)

Week 14: Music and Sexuality

-Anon., from *Teleny*

-Oscar Wilde, from *The Picture of Dorian Gray*

-Joe Law, “‘The Perniciously Homosexual Art:’ Music and Homoerotic Desire in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*” (from *The Idea of Music in Victorian Fiction*, eds. Sophie Fuller and Nicky Losseff)

-Vernon Lee, “A Wicked Voice”

-Lee, from *Music and Its Lovers*

Week 15: Music and Modernism

-Katherine Mansfield, “Prelude”

-James Joyce, “The Dead”

-Wallace Stevens, “The Man with the Blue Guitar”

-Theodor Adorno, from *Essays on Music*

-Josh Epstein, “Orchestrating Modernity: Musical Culture and the Arts of Noise” (from *Sublime Noise*)

-Brad Bucknell, “Preliminaries: Of Music and Modernism” (in *Literary Modernism and Musical Aesthetics*)

Week 16: Coda

****PAPER TWO DUE****