

Politics in Music and Song conference, Queen's University Belfast, 8–10 September 2023

Paper Proposal

Title: Thomas Cooper and the Rise and Fall of Chartist Songwriting

Abstract:

Of the many writers, poets, and musicians the Chartist movement fostered, Thomas Cooper was, perhaps, the most remarkable. A former choirboy and secretary of the Lincoln Choral Society, Cooper was an avid believer in the emotional and psychological power of music. Drawn into Chartism through witnessing appalling poverty in Leicester in the early 1840s, he set about creating an extraordinary flourishing of working-class musicianship, training his followers to sing together at public meetings and protests, and encouraging the most talented to write their own songs, and even compose choral works, quite possibly the earliest examples of working-class musical composition in British history. In Cooper's mind, music—especially singing together—were inseparable from the campaign for democracy. His promotion of the working-class musical voice was widely seen as inspirational by other Chartists and immensely provoking to the authorities, fearful of the collective solidarities fostered by this music-making. By the later 1840s, however, Cooper began to turn away from song as a tool of political activism. By the mid-1850s, he even condemned those who still mixed up music with politics as 'dancing, fiddling, frivolous people'. The reasons for this shift are complex, but they are symptomatic of a wider turning away in Chartist circles from the collective music-making of the movement's early years towards a quieter, less musical, and more individualistic mode of political engagement. Moreover, it is no coincidence that the less musical the movement became, the easier it became for some of the movement's leaders to become incorporated within Liberal political circles. While certain individuals, such as Thomas Cooper, thus found increasing acceptance within more elite cultural and political milieux, the beauty, power, and promise of the collective working-class musical voice was increasingly lost, or diverted into apolitical avenues, a parting of ways with lasting consequences for British democracy.

Biography:

David Kennerley is a Leverhulme Early Career Fellow in History at Queen Mary University of London, where he is currently completing a book, provisionally entitled *Articulate Uproar: A Sonic History of Chartism and the Origins of British Democracy*, which examines the role of sound, music, and song within mid-nineteenth-century working-class radicalism. His first monograph, *Sounding Feminine: Women's Voices in British Musical Culture, 1780–1850* was published by Oxford University Press in 2020, and his work has also appeared in the *Historical Journal*, the *English Historical Review* and the *Journal of British Studies*. He is a founding member of the interdisciplinary research network, the Nineteenth-Century Song Club (<https://c19songclub.com>).

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Please note: My contract at Queen Mary expires at the end of July 2023. While I hope to be in continuing academic employment thereafter, this may not be the case, which may therefore affect my ability to attend this conference. I hope you would still consider my paper for inclusion, but I would also understand if you did not want to take the risk.