

From the band of musick to the concert party, c. 1780-1918: musical entertainment in the British army

It is quite difficult to make an absolute distinction between music with a military purpose and music made by military musicians as entertainment. Musical entertainment played by military musicians, whether aimed at the local populace or the rank-and-file soldier, is typically a tool of soft power, designed variously to enforce a sense of authority, discipline and order, to allay suspicion and hostility, or to boost morale and solidarity in situations of tension and conflict. But for our purposes here, we will concentrate specifically on those performances that can be described as formal entertainment - music to accompany dinners and dances, and concert performances of one kind or another.

The regimental band became a routine feature of the British army in the late eighteenth century. It played on the parade ground and it helped to keep the troops moving at a uniform pace on the march, and the martial sound and visual glamour of the regimental band were important in recruiting, as we see in this extract from the memoir of Alexander Alexander, a Scottish recruit to the Royal Artillery in 1801:

As I sauntered about the streets of Glasgow, I saw the new guard marching to relieve the old, their band playing a cheerful air. This being the first military band I had ever heard, I was quite charmed with it, and followed, unconsciously taking the step and holding up my head. A military enthusiasm instantly seized me, and I felt as if a soldier's life was the only station for which nature had designed me.¹

But from the outset, their more overtly martial functions were just part of the story. Early bands were regarded as the private property of the officers, who paid for them by subscription to a band fund - a view which persisted even after funding was centralised in the mid-nineteenth century. One of their key

¹ John Howells (ed.), *The Life of Alexander Alexander: Written by Himself* (Edinburgh, 1830), quoted in T. H. McGuffie (compiler), *Rank and File: The Common Soldier at Peace and War 1642-1914* (London: Hutchinson, 1964), p. 13.

functions was to play at dinner in the officers' mess – a scene illustrated in a sketch by the artist George Scharf, done in the Marine Officers' Mess at the regiment's barracks at Woolwich, London, in 1826 (Fig. 1). The mess modelled itself on the atmosphere and practices of a gentlemen's club. It functioned to allow officers to drink, dine and socialise in a style that marked them as socially superior to their men - and hence, so it was assumed - as being in possession of the qualities of a natural commander. Indeed, the instrumentation of these early 'bands of musick' is something of a give-away in this regard, pointing us to their origins in the Austro-German *Harmoniemusik* formation (broadly, oboes, clarinets and horns, with bassoon or serpent - later trombone - in the bass part), an instrumentation that originated in European art music and aristocratic entertainment. As depicted by Scharf, its affinity with social exclusivity and gentility seems obvious.

If mess culture was primarily intended to convey a message of superiority to the common soldiery, the army was not slow to realise the value of a band as a tool of soft power aimed at the civilian population, both at home and abroad. John Williamson's *Advice to the Officers of the British Army*, published in 1782, satirises the tendency for Commanding Officers to regard the regimental band as a facility to be lent out for private parties and social occasions, so as to 'raise up a considerable interest among the gentlemen of the county and, what is more consequence, among the ladies.'² In fact, the interest of 'the ladies' was far from a minor point, and it crops up in a variety of sources as an indicator of the social and civilian function of a military band in encouraging a friendly reception from the local community, which might otherwise have been inclined to resent the presence of a regiment as at best an inconvenience and at worst the imposition of an alien disciplinary force. Bands dazzled with their glamour, and embodied the precision, discipline and order which the army wanted to impress on the civilian population; but most seductively of all, they entertained with popular melodies and the latest operatic and classical repertoire and dance music, and wherever a sophisticated civilian

² John Williamson (also attributed to Francis Grose), *Advice to the Officers of the British Army: A Satire* (London: W. Richardson, 1782), p. 28.

infrastructure for leisure and entertainment was lacking, the regimental band became indispensable.

This was certainly true of colonial communities; an anonymous two-part article entitled 'On the employment of time in India', published in 1851, describes a 'continual whirligig of dinners, balls and other amusements'³ - all events at which a band would have been essential. But regimental bands were equally central to social life in Britain outside the major towns and cities, and the social and civilian functions of bands became so prominent that senior commanders started to feel uneasy. In 1828 a memorandum from the Commander in Chief to all Commanding Officers demanded a statement from each regiment of the subscriptions payable by officers to the mess and band funds.⁴ This exposed both widespread extravagance and a lack of a system for standardising and curbing expenditure on what, in his response to the findings, the Commander in Chief disdainfully termed 'expensive Fêtes and Entertainments';⁵ and it led ultimately to the capping of subscriptions.

However, there seems to have been no argument within the army about other aspects of the entertainment function of bands. From very early on - and we certainly have evidence of this from the 1820s - bands regularly played to the local population outside the barracks or in some public space. On another of his trips to the barracks at Woolwich, this time in 1825, George Scharf made a watercolour sketch of a band playing outside the Artillery Barracks to a mixed audience of officers and civilians, some strolling past, others stopping to listen more attentively (Fig.2). Woolwich Barracks was home to several regiments, so the locals enjoyed a particularly rich musical life as the various regimental bands took turns in performing, 'mostly', as Henry George Farmer recounts in his history of the Royal Artillery, 'for the delectation of the inhabitants of the town', who were thus 'well supplied with music'.⁶

³ 'On the employment of time in India', *Colburn's United Service Magazine*, 1851, Part 1, p. 561. The second part of the article appeared in Part II of the 1851 edition (pp. 209-16).

⁴ National Archives, London, WO 123/455, 'Circular memoranda on dress, mess and band funds 1828-30', 6 November 1828.

⁵ National Archives, London, WO 123/455, 'Circular memoranda on dress, mess and band funds 1828-30', 13 July 1829, p. 3.

⁶ Henry George Farmer, *History of the Royal Artillery Band, 1762-1953* (London: Royal Artillery Institution, 1954), p. 137.

Scharf's sketchbook also includes some pencil sketches of military band musicians which he annotated with the words 'This Band of the Horse Guards are playing during the summer's [sic] evenings, to a great assembly in Kensington Gardens. This was about 1830.'⁷ So even from relatively early in the nineteenth century, public parks were a convenient venue for such performances - increasingly so as the municipal park became part of the urban landscape. From the middle of the nineteenth century, performances were typically accommodated by the bandstands which became a standard feature of Victorian municipal parks throughout Britain and its empire; and though bandstands were also occupied by amateur brass bands, it was regimental bands that set the precedent of an open-air concert which anyone of any social class could attend, free of charge.⁸ An image from the illustrated newspaper *The Graphic* shows an audience listening to a military band in Hyde Park, London, in 1895 (Fig. 3). *The Graphic* broke new ground in making a feature of full-page illustrations with a social message. The artist here is Arthur Hopkins, brother of the poet Gerard Manley, and the paper employed a number of other artists who would become prominent in Victorian social realist painting, including Luke Fildes, Hubert von Herkomer and Frank Holl. So the rather didactic thrust of this illustration and its very detailed caption, highlighting the peaceable mingling of social classes and types (or as the caption says, "all sorts and conditions"... from... the frock-coated and top-hatted class to the soldier and the servant girl'), is quite in keeping with the general leaning of the paper.⁹

⁷ London, British Museum, 1900,0725.102. The sketches can be viewed on the British Museum's 'Collection Online' webpages, at http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=1900,0725.102

⁸ There might be a modest charge if one wanted to listen to the performance from the comfort of a chair - see note 9.

⁹ The caption reads, 'It would be difficult to find any step taken within recent years to brighten the lives of Londoners that has been more widely appreciated than the introduction of bands into the public parks. For many years it was a reproach to London that the barrel-organ or German band was the only kind of open-air music of which it could boast: now there is scarcely a public park where a band does not play once or twice a week. In Hyde Park a military band plays every Sunday afternoon, besides on two week days, and it is only necessary to see the faces of the large crowd which gathers round the band stand to know how greatly the boon is valued. Seated in chairs, for which the sum of one penny is asked, is an audience made up of "all sorts and conditions," from the representatives of the frock-

From the later nineteenth century into the early twentieth century, there is significant evidence of what bandmasters thought about the purpose of the concerts provided by military bands. John Mackenzie-Rogan, whose career reached the heights of an appointment as bandmaster of the elite Coldstream Guards, published an essay entitled 'Regimental bands: their history and role of usefulness', in which he stated his belief that military bands did not merely entertain, but also educated and evoked higher sentiments and aspirations in the public, and particularly in 'the poorer members of society [to whom] the high-class concert-hall and the opera-house are closed'.¹⁰ From his time serving in India, he also testified to the morale-boosting and even health-giving benefits of band concerts:

Those of you who have experienced Indian summers at Dinapore, Allahabad, Jhansi, Cawnpore, and similar stations, with the thermometer, in the shade, hovering at the three-figure mark, for at least two or three months of the year, will appreciate the enlivenment of the 'Long, long, Indian day,' when the regimental band at the station bandstand or in the regimental gardens at the close of day, discourses the latest music from home. The band performances vary the dreary monotony of cantonment life and help to dispel the depression consequent thereon. Their effect upon the general health and tone of the troops is incalculable. During epidemics of cholera or fever...daily programmes of light and lively music have acted as a wholesome tonic to the community, and in many cases have helped to restrain the men from indulgence in drink and other excesses.¹¹

Military life in India was noted for encouraging extravagant spending amongst officers and men - gambling, drink and polo ponies are frequently cited, and military music was no exception. The string band of the King's Own Scottish Borderers was photographed around 1893 (Fig. 4), some twenty years after the practice of keeping a string band or orchestra in addition to the regimental band had been officially criticised as an extravagance in a memorandum from

coated and top-hatted class to the soldier and the servant girl - an audience not very critical perhaps, but highly appreciative.'

¹⁰ John Mackenzie-Rogan, 'Regimental bands - their history and role of usefulness', *Musical Times*, 1 January 1913, 30.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

the Commander in Chief.¹² However, numerous regiments persisted in supporting them throughout the nineteenth century - the most extravagant example being the Royal Artillery, which, in addition to a band which had grown to eighty players by 1856, also boasted a celebrated orchestra which played a major role in London concert life in the second half of the nineteenth century, enjoying the patronage of Queen Victoria. The photograph of the string band of the King's Own Scottish Borderers adds weight to the suspicion that such practices were indulged by many in the army hierarchy, since it was taken for the souvenir farewell album presented to Lord Roberts of Kandahar on leaving his post as Commander in Chief of the British Army in India.

Bands continued to maintain the atmosphere of privilege and authority in the officers' mess – captured particularly vividly in an Indian context in an image from the sketchbook of Lt Quayle, an officer in the Indian Army,¹³ serving in Poona (Pune) in 1911. The sketch shows the weekly band concert, with the officers relaxing on the verandah of the mess, waited on by their Indian servants and listening to western musical classics played by their Indian regimental band (Fig. 5). Despite the different geographical context, the atmosphere evoked here seems scarcely to have changed in the century since George Scharf sketched the band playing for dinner at Woolwich Barracks.

Lt Quayle recorded this visual impression in very much the same period as Mackenzie-Rogan was writing about the didactic and moral purpose of military band concerts. Neither of them could have foreseen the significance and indeed the forms which musical entertainment was about to take for soldiers and officers alike, just a year or two later, with the outbreak of the First World War. World War I presented a radically new and devastating experience of war, and perhaps it should be no surprise to find that musical entertainment took on some new and in some cases challenging forms, and became embodied in a new kind of unofficial 'military musician'.

¹² Royal Military School of Music archive, Circular, 103/Gen. no. 189, MSS 9, 20 December 1876.

¹³ The Indian Army and the British Army in India were separate institutions. Both the officers and the rank-and-file soldiers of the British Army were British, while the majority of officers of the Indian Army were British, and rank-and-file soldiers were Indian.

Regimental bands faced severe challenges to their existence at the Front. Bandsmen were primarily medical auxiliaries, and they paid a heavy price in casualties. The band of the 10th Yorkshire Regiment was lost in its entirety on 1 July 1916, the first day of the Battle of the Somme, as one of their junior officers, Max Plowman, recounted in his memoir: 'At present we have no band: not only the bandsmen but the instruments were lost on July 1st.' He goes on to tell us of a plan to pull together one of many a hastily-formed, makeshift band, which officers were keen to have to facilitate marching and raise soldiers' spirits: 'However, I hear the colonel is keen to raise something in the drum-and-fife line, and the men will welcome it, first with jeers and then with cheers, like every innovation.'¹⁴

Obviously all this put a severe limit on the availability of regimental bands to provide the rather genteel and high-minded concerts that Mackenzie-Rogan writes about, and instead we see the rise of a new type of military musical ensemble - the divisional concert party. In fact, there were two types of concert party. There were civilian ones, most famously those organised by the British actress Lena Ashwell, and fondly remembered by Edith Appleton, a nurse with Queen Alexandra's Imperial Military Nursing Service. Edith's diary records an occasion in July 1916, at Étretat in northern France, when 'Lena Ashwell's concert party were here and gave us a charming selection of songs and violin and piano pieces.'¹⁵ But the *divisional* concert party was a much less polite affair. It had antecedents in the regimental theatricals of the nineteenth century, which were highly popular with regiments stationed abroad and in which it was typical, faced with the absence of women, or at least the absence of any who thought it proper to appear on a stage, female roles were taken by men, appropriately costumed. It was also a culture inculcated, certainly as far as officers were concerned, from training onwards; 'Gentleman Cadets' of the Royal Military College, Sandhurst – for example – routinely displayed their musical talents in a Christmas show or concert; Fig. 6 shows a programme from 1900.

¹⁴ Max Plowman, *A Subaltern on the Somme* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Company, 1928), pp. 60-3.

¹⁵ Ruth Cowen (ed.), *A Nurse at the Front: The First World War Diaries of Sister Edith Appleton* (London: Simon & Schuster, 2013), p. 84

So divisional concert parties owed something to existing forms, but there is a sense that this kind of entertainment, by soldiers for soldiers, takes on a particular character and intensity in the context of World War I, both because it becomes more obviously aligned with music hall and the variety show and their cruder and more risqué ‘turns’, and simply because of the nature of that particular war, in which ordinary men who were not professional soldiers confronted experiences which they could not have imagined in their most bizarre and appalling nightmares. Soldiers’ memoirs and diaries frequently describe their experiences in the trenches with words such as ‘mad’, ‘idiocy’ and ‘lunacy’, and music hall offered a form of widely understood, mass entertainment which took forms that suited the expression of an experience of madness, confusion, and the world turned on its head. In the towns and villages where soldiers were billeted for a period of respite from the trenches, halls were commandeered, or the YMCA set up social amenities. Here pierrot and minstrel troupes with apposite names such as ‘The Grenades’¹⁶ (Fig. 7) sung popular and sentimental songs which gave vent to soldiers’ frustrations, fears and homesickness, the words suitably amended to fit the current context, and acted out satirical sketches or ‘skits’. Few, if any, of the skits can really have been scathingly critical, but they did allow soldiers a way to send up the situation in which they found themselves and, perhaps, by implication, the decisions of politicians and senior commanders.

The poet Edmund Blunden’s memoir gives us a flavour of some of the acts that were put on - by men whom, as he points out, had all been sent ‘over the top’; that is, out of the dubious protection of the trenches into the shelling, the machine-gun fire and the barbed wire:

...the pierrots chirruped and gambolled... and never was music sweeter than the ragtime then obtaining, if appreciation indexes merit. “Take me back to dear old Blighty” was too much for us—we roared inanely, and when a creditable cardboard train was jerked across the stage and the performers looking out of the windows sang their chorus, “Birmingham, Leeds or Manchester,” the force of illusion could no

¹⁶ Probably the concert party of the 64th Brigade, Royal Field Artillery. Cited in Susan Howson, *Lionel Robbins* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), p. 43.

further go.... “On the day on which Peace is declared,” a neat little skit, and “When you’re a long, long way from home” will never cease to ring pathetically through the years between. All the performers had been over the top.¹⁷

Another essential component was the drag act:

After tea we went to the ‘Very Lights’ a concert party of — Div. which was excellent... The man who was Columbine danced perfectly & was a jolly good impersonator. Our Div. lady is hopeless always mincing about & very gawky, grinning inanely the while! In fact our ‘Duds’ are hopeless where compared with the Very Lights.¹⁸

Drag acts clearly varied considerably, from the clumsy and inane through to genuine female impersonation. In their pierrot troupe mode at least, The Grenades (Fig. 7) seem to have aimed at a degree of sophistication, though the results were unlikely to fool anybody - nor was that the intention. The Saarlouis concert party (named rather prosaically, compared to many others, for the place where the regiment was stationed) kept a detailed record listing all its shows, their cast lists, written descriptions of the costumes accompanied by watercolour illustrations, and photographs of the cast in performance. The images are replete with comic tensions between the female characters as imagined in the watercolours and photographs of the men who actually embodied them. The red and black Columbine dancer in Fig. 8 is clearly identified on the opposite page as P.G. Diplock, the frequency of whose appearances in the record show him to have been a leading light of the concert party. In Fig. 9 he is seen in more serious mode as an officer and member of the theatrical committee.

¹⁷ Edmund Blunden, *Undertones of War* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1982), pp. 128-9.

¹⁸ Letter from Geoffrey Thurlow to Vera Brittain, 15 December 1916, in Alan Bishop and Mark Bostridge (eds), *Letters from a Lost Generation: First World War Letters of Vera Brittain and Four Friends* (London: Abacus, 1999), pp. 299-300. The ‘Very Lights’ concert party took their name from a type of flare widely used in World War I. ‘The Duds’, being apposite on several levels, was an unsurprisingly popular name used by several concert parties, but this one belonged to Thurlow’s regiment, the 10th Sherwood Foresters.

A useful framework for looking at the drag act in this context is the Bakhtinian idea of carnivalesque, or inversion of reality as an ultimately restorative process.¹⁹ For men who lived in a highly, almost exclusively, masculinised environment, drag was an anarchic inversion of reality - a temporary liberation from normality and perhaps also, particularly in its more outrageous and camp expressions, an oblique comment on the madness of 'normality' as lived on the Front. But the crucial point is that drag and satire were forms of 'licensed foolery'. They allowed a certain freedom of speech, an erasing of hierarchy and a turning inside-out of reality, but in the end, they functioned as a safety valve which restored the status quo and enabled people to accept and return to reality.

The army seems to have been quick to recognise this, and most divisions formed a concert party. It is also worth pointing out that it was increasingly the case that both officers and men were involved as performers on the same stage - this was neither the exclusive province of officers, nor a case of having one troupe for officers and another made up of rank-and-file soldiers, as was common in the nineteenth century with regimental leisure and sporting groups. In part this is in keeping with the sense that the carnivalesque/music hall genre enabled the erasure of hierarchical distinctions, although it also had a lot to do with the eminently practical fact that divisional concert parties typically formed around a nucleus of one or two rank-and-file soldiers who were professional music hall performers in civilian life:

Six of us went to a concert in the town this evening, given by the 12th Division, and enjoyed it very much. An officer and one man came in from the trenches to sing, then went back. Some of the men were music-hall professionals in peacetime.... The hall was packed with officers and men and there were 12 of us sisters - so luckily only one song was at all risky.²⁰

The risqué, anarchic, clumsy and crude world of the divisional concert party may seem a million miles away from the discipline, order and indeed

¹⁹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, Helen Iswolsky (trans.), (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984. The concept of carnivalesque is addressed throughout.

²⁰ Edith Appleton's diary for 24 August 1915, in Cowen, *A Nurse at the Front*, p. 46.

sophistication of the regimental bands and string orchestras of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but they have this much in common: all were forms of entertainment whose central purpose was in one way or another the preservation of order and the acceptance of authority - which no doubt goes a long way to explain why the army hierarchy was not over-zealous about stamping out those that contravened regulations. The army recognised the potential of musical entertainment as a palatable way to impress the civilian population and reconcile them to a military presence. Equally, and with a degree of tolerance and imagination that might surprise us, it recognised its value in helping soldiers to accommodate and adjust themselves to the suffering and horrors of war.

Helen Barlow, 'From the band of musick to the concert party': list of illustrations with captions

Figure 1, George Scharf, *At the Marine Officers Mess Room at Woolwich, during Dinner* (1826), (London, British Museum, 1900,0725.101). © Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 2, George Scharf, *At Woolwich in front of the Artillery Barracks* (1825), (London, British Museum, 1862,0614.201). © Trustees of the British Museum.

Figure 3, Arthur Hopkins, *Open-Air Music in London: Listening to the Military Band in Hyde Park*, engraving from *The Graphic* (31 August 1895).

Figure 4, *The string band of the King's Own Scottish Borderers*, 1893, (NAM 1955-04-54 (23)).

Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

Figure 5, *Mess – Bandnight. Poona 1911*, from the sketchbook of Lt Quayle, (NAM 1961-11-134).

Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

Figure 6, *Royal Military College, Sandhurst, Programme, A-B Companies Concert*, 20 December 1900, (NAM 2005-09-88). Courtesy of the Council of the National Army Museum, London.

Figure 7, *The Grenades*, 1919, (World War, 1914-1918, collection, Box 22, Number 720). The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library.

Figure 8, *Variety Show, 23rd October 1918*, from the Saarlouis Theatrical Committee scrapbook, 1918, (Saarlouis Theatrical Committee Fonds, Sh. 9, Folder 7). The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library.

Figure 9, *Saarlouis Theatrical Committee*, from the Saarlouis Theatrical Committee scrapbook, 1918, (Saarlouis Theatrical Committee Fonds, Sh. 9, Folder 7). The William Ready Division of Archives and Research Collections, McMaster University Library.