

Conference Proceedings:

Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space

Venue: University and Museum of Copenhagen,

August 24-25 2023



EARLY MODERN SOUNDSCAPES

---

**“These ugly Shouters”: Street Ballads and  
Soundscape Experiences in  
Eighteenth-Century Copenhagen**

---

Ulrik Langen

---

# “These ugly Shouters”: Street Ballads and Soundscape Experiences in Eighteenth-Century Copenhagen

---

## Ulrik Langen

Ulrik Langen is a Professor of 18th-century Cultural History at the Saxo Institute, University of Copenhagen and has published several books and articles on Eighteenth-Century Urban History. He is currently PI of the research project “Copenhagen Complains”.<sup>1</sup>

The female ballad-mongers of Copenhagen – sometimes singing, sometimes merely shouting the titles of the ballads for sale – belong to the category of “multifaceted figures” under the name of street singers, which recently have been the object of scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> Charlatans, entertainers, and professional street performers of different kinds were a pan-European phenomenon. Still, the Copenhagen street singers seem to have most in common with the Parisian chanteurs de rue, buying cheaply printed songs wholesale to disseminate them for a small profit with the help of singing or shouting.<sup>3</sup> In this paper, I will demonstrate how eighteenth-century female ballad-mongers were – in print and in written complaints and with specific reference to their voices, personal appearance, and low social status – portrayed as urban undesirables. This rendering was – among other things – done with the intent to cause a ban against them. Also, temporal and spatial concerns played a role in this attempt to expel ballad-mongers from the urban public space.

Much research indicates that, despite the groundbreaking influence of the printing press, most social, political, and religious exchanges occurred orally in early modern European cities. In the words of German historian Rudolph Schlögl, the early modern city was an *Anwesenheitsgesellschaft*; a society of presence, a face-

---

1 <https://saxoinstitute.ku.dk/research/history/copenhagen-complains/>.

2 L. Degl’Innocenti & M. Rospocher, ‘Introduction’, *Renaissance Studies*, 33:1 (2019), 5-16.

3 U. McIlvenna, ‘Chanteurs de rue, or street singers in early modern France’, *Renaissance Studies*, 33:1 (2019), 64-95.

to-face culture in which the changing interrelation between orality and the written played a significant role.<sup>4</sup> Early modern urban societies were, furthermore characterized by a diverse and intricate media system encompassing verbal, visual, and written forms of communication – a phenomenon often referred to as intermediality (in which different media depend on and refer to each other). Furthermore, it is important to stress that orality is not only about voice, but also about gesture, facial expression, and posture.<sup>5</sup> The songs and the female balladmongers constituted a significant part of this urban media landscape.

As Jeroen Salman mentions regarding street singers in the Low Countries, the actual ballad singer can be hard to trace in the archives despite the omnipresence of printed ballads and street singing in early modern cities.<sup>6</sup> In this paper, I have used published sources from the 1780s (which might be familiar to scholars of Danish-Norwegian street singing) and one very singular and quite understudied written complaint. While eighteenth-century Britain, for instance, saw the emergence of an extensive print discourse about ballads, Danish-Norwegian comments were few.<sup>7</sup> But especially in the 1780s, there seems to have been public attention to the ballads and the presence of sellers in urban spaces.<sup>8</sup>

Copenhagen periodicals of the 1780s were critical of the ballads and what the writers considered urban noise pollution. Several writers suggested censorship or even prohibition to overcome what they considered an increasing problem. The writers clearly linked sensory impressions to social imaginary, and there is – in this discourse – an evident connection between the content of the songs, their place in the urban soundscape, and the low social status of the consumers. At the same time, the actual production of the songs is brought to the fore and linked to the urban communicative system. One writer notes that one thing is “the terrible flood of stupid street songs we are now plagued with” (and thus emphasizing the increasing production), another is the “horrible voices” that advertise them.<sup>9</sup> The voices

---

4 R. Schlögl, "Politik beobachten. Öffentlichkeit und Medien in der frühen Neuzeit", *Zeitschrift für Historische Forschung*, 35:4 (2008), 581–616. R. Schlögl, *Anwesende und Abwesende. Grundriss für eine Gesellschaftsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, (Wallstein Verlag, 2014) 109-136.

5 S. Dall'Aglio, B. Richardson & M. Rospocher (eds.), *Voices and Texts in Early Modern Italian Society* (Routledge 2017), 3-5.

6 J. Salman, "Frail echoes of singing in the streets. Tracing ballad sellers and their reputation in the Low Countries", *Renaissance Studies*, 33:1 (2019), 119-135.

7 P. McDowell, "'The Art of Printing was Fatal': Print Commerce and the Idea of Oral Tradition in Long Eighteenth-Century Ballad Discourse", P. Fumerton et. al., *Ballads and Broad-sides in Britain, 1500-1800* (Routledge 2010), 35-56.

8 There are no production or sales figures for ballad publications during this period, but an estimate as high as 20,000 copies a week at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century has been mentioned: I. Piø, *Produktionen af danske skillingsviser mellem 1770 og 1821*, (Københavns Universitet 1969), 36-37. So, we don't know if this attention was linked to a growth in ballad production. However, the Press Freedom Period 1770-1773 created a permanent increase in the production of pamphlets, books, and journals, and it is more than likely that the same applies to the street ballad.

9 *Morgen-Posten*, 14 Jul. 1786, 4-7.

reveal "the taste of the common Danish people", so the connection between voices and bad taste is one-to-one. Moreover, the women's voices alone place them at the bottom of the sonic and social hierarchy. This gendered interpretation of the sellers' voices – as we see in this example – is common in all texts, I have analyzed.

What can be done to bring peace to your "soul and ears," the writer asks. The obvious thing is to ask the police chief to impose a ban, but this is probably too drastic. Instead, the songs should be subjected to censorship. This would have two advantages. First, the quality of the ballads would improve. Secondly, the number of ballads would decline, thus, the "horrid shrieking would decrease". The point seems to be, that censoring the content of ballads would, therefore, favorably affect the soundscape. There is no clear distinction between singing and oral advertising in this text (as in the following examples).

In a fictional conversation in another periodical, an interlocutor mentions that "never have our streets teemed with new ballads as they do now".<sup>10</sup> They are – according to the interlocutor – stupid and morally corrupt and it is "disgusting music when I hear these street swarms walking up and down the street and howling". His conversation partner is more lenient towards the ballads because he believes they can bring knowledge to the common people. The first breaks in: "But no sensible man could ever give his approval to ballads of such a pitiful, crazy, and often disgusting content as most of the ones you hear on the street". Thus, it is from the streets that he knows the songs and their content – not from having read them. This is a recurring feature of the anti-ballad discourse; the opponents refer – directly og indirectly – to being involuntarily acoustically exposed in public to the content of the ballads. They have not read them. A dialogue now develops about the content of the songs, and it is suggested that a censor be hired to read through the ballads and approve them. One should not be ignorant of the slightly satirical tone in portraying the interlocutors' rhetoric.

In a later issue of the same periodical, we find a conversation between a visitor from the countryside and a citizen of Copenhagen.<sup>11</sup> The visitor is appalled by the violent shrieking and screaming of "sales hags" who "howl with songs". He associates the appearance of the vendors with the content of the songs and the noise: "It looks more like begging than a commercial activity; it's disgraceful to see ragged hags, bare-legged girls and naked boys running up and down the street shouting: "So new songs!". In this article, the usual female balladmongers are supplemented with destitute-looking children. Wouldn't it be better, the visitor asks, if these desolate people ("these screamers") were put to work on something beneficial to

---

10 *Kjøbenhavns Aftenpost*, 1783 no. 72, unpaginated.

11 *Kjøbenhavns Aftenpost*, 1785, no. 61, unpaginated.

society and humanity in general? Because the loud selling of songs is a sort of disguised begging and implicit laziness that ultimately leads them into prostitution ("lecherous harlots") and theft ("insidious thieves") if they are not already there. So, it seems that the writer actually argues, that disagreeable physical or personal appearance and unpleasant voices are the first signs of potential crime.

If we move from the writers' moral (or slightly satirized) representations to an individual historical figure's textualization of experiences and impressions, a particular letter from the 42-year-old vicar of the Church of Our Lady in central Copenhagen, Johan Christian Schønheyder, is significant among the scanty source material. Unlike the periodicals, Schønheyder's description was not written for publication. It was composed as a morally charged protest to the Copenhagen chief of police, demanding that something be done about the escalating issue of female street ballad vendors.<sup>12</sup>

The connection between sound and morality runs as a strong undercurrent. Schønheyder's complaint stems from "ordinary civic feeling", and the women's singing and shouting is described as a "mockery" of the Copenhageners' "civic feeling of modesty". The argument is based on a moral assumption that there is a proportionality between the songwriters' "frivolity and licentiousness" and the women's shouting. He recounts "how all day long, in every street, the ears of respectable people are harassed, and their minds offended by the ugly shrill shrieks of these idlers with dishonorable song titles", and how the sellers "publicly insult the ears of all inhabitants (high and low)". The social positioning of the saleswomen as idlers was a standard description, which we also found in the example above from the periodicals.

Fearing an escalation of impudence among the citizens, Schønheyder distinguishes between sound, noise, and something even worse: subversive shouting. "One hears the most indecent words shouted", he says. To exemplify this and give substance to the complaint, Schønheyder has to "taint" his letter – as he puts it himself – with some words that are thus audibly available to all city dwellers. Schønheyder then provides examples of what is being shouted: "Look here! The new ballad about the bridegroom who put horns on his sweetheart – The new song about a pair of beautiful eyes and white teeth and narrow legs and soft hands and a pair of round thighs". One can imagine how personally transgressive it must have been for Schønheyder to write down these sexually charged titles.

The reason why I highlight this passage is that it is the only mentioning of actual words and songs in the material – the representations in the periodicals are

---

12 National Archives of Denmark (NAD), Danish Chancellery, Koncepter og indlæg til brevboøger no. 740, 1785, Schønheyder to Fædder 30 Mar. 1785.

solely descriptive with no specific reference other than the writers' textualization of his or her experiences of hearing the sellers in the streets. Unfortunately, I have not been able to identify the ballads Schønheyder refers to. In addition to these examples, Schønheyder points to other ballads targeting specific people and events with insults and "prostitution". The persons are not necessarily named but appear under initials that anyone can guess. Schønheyder concludes that "when idlers on the streets dare to shout whatever they want, whenever they want", a moral breakdown is expected (Schønheyder's underlining).

The main moralist argument is embedded in a converging of the spatial and the sensorial. According to Schønheyder, every Christian man is obliged to complain about how the women have "shouted their exorbitant song titles on the city's main streets". Here Schønheyder begins his most important complaint: the time and place of the singing of the songs. Ballads are sung on the city's main streets, even during Easter. In addition, many churchgoers leaving the churches after evening service are met with "these ugly shouters". This passage of the complaint can be seen as part of a sensory struggle over urban territories. The pulpit was the official communication channel of state power, from which new decrees and laws were verbally announced. When churchgoers stepped out of the church, they were met by competing voices communicating content regarded as being in moral opposition to church and state dogma; it was the controlled space of the church versus popular alternatives in public space. Furthermore, an implicit emotional claim is that churchgoers were pulled out of the devout atmosphere that the vicar had built up during service when they left the church and ventured into public space. The problem is that no one is safe from the offensive words of the vendors – not even when leaving the church during Easter. It was staged as a sonic battle between ecclesiastical authority and street vendors to control public space. To the balladmongers, the commercial point of being in places where many potential customers were gathered may have been imperative to any battle of morality.

The affected streets are referred to as "the streets of the royal capital" and "the largest streets in the city" to add weight to the argument. Naturally, geographic relevance was crucial to balladmongers, who operated in the streets in which they would most likely succeed in attracting attention. Schønheyder continues to articulate the spatial aspect when he talks about how it is a duty to complain about "excessively bold and authorized lechery and harlotry on the streets of the capital". The words "authorized lechery and harlotry" refers to the – in his eyes – disheartening fact that women were permitted to sell the broadsides, shout the titles, and sing the ballads. So, in agreement with the views expressed in some of the period-

icals, Schönheyder wants a ban on balladmonger's permission to "shout with these ballads".

The police chief seems to have agreed. The day before receiving the complaint from Schönheyder, the chief of police had himself written the Danish Chancellery suggesting a retrenchment of the printing, distribution, and "shouting" of "outrageous" ballads which were getting out of control.<sup>13</sup> As a response to this, the Chancellery ordered the chief of police to gather the printers of the city and explain to them that they would be fined if they published and distributed (with the help of those "who run the streets selling them") ballads that were "contrary to decency and public morals".<sup>14</sup> Besides the point that this exemplifies how executing prohibitions fell within the world of orality, it is striking that the Chancellery placed moral responsibility with the printers and was indirectly protecting the street singers from police persecution.

The anti-ballad discourse reflected a sensory struggle over urban territories, as evidenced by the Copenhagen periodicals' critique of ballads as urban noise pollution. The gendered interpretation of the sellers' voices emerges as a common theme, reinforcing their position at the bottom of both the sonic and social hierarchy. The anti-ballad sentiment was rooted in moral considerations, and the proposed solutions, ranging from censorship to prohibition, highlight the attempt to curate the urban soundscape. The individual protest of Johan Christian Schönheyder underscores the moral undercurrent, emphasizing the spatial and temporal aspects of the sonic struggle. Furthermore, the anti-ballad discourse reflected diverse aspects of early modern intermediality. Elements such as the linguistic intricacies employed by ballad authors, the sonic dimensions encapsulated in the songs, the materiality inherent in printed songs and the role of the printer, the performative aspects encompassing gesture and voice, as well as the visual components relating to the appearance of the performer, including attire and looks, anti-ballad discourse reflects the tapestry of intermediality. Moreover, the temporal and spatial dimensions of performance, encompassing considerations of time of day and year, public spaces, and the diverse audiences engaged, were crucial elements in the anti-ballad discourse.

---

13 NAD: Copenhagen Police, Correspondence 1774-86, PM 29 Mar. 1785 to the Danish Chancellery.

14 NAD: Copenhagen Police, Chancellery letters 1774-88, PM 9 Apr. 1785.

**How to cite:**

Ulrik Langen: ““These ugly Shouters”: Street Ballads and Soundscape Experiences in Eighteenth-Century Copenhagen” in Parby, Jakob Ingemann (ed.): *Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space*, August 24-25, Copenhagen 2023. University of Copenhagen and Museum of Copenhagen, 2024.

**“These ugly Shouters”: Street Ballads and Soundscape Experiences in Eighteenth-Century Copenhagen  
©2024 Ulrik Langen**

In Conference Proceedings: Sound, Language and the Making of Urban Space  
University and Museum of Copenhagen, August 24-25 2023

Editor: Jakob Ingemann Parby, Museum of Copenhagen

Design & Layout: Anna Falcon, [www.annafalcon.dk](http://www.annafalcon.dk)

Cover Design: Elias Friberg Lewinsky

The conference and the proceedings were funded by The Velux Foundation