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CREATIVE URBAN MILIEUS

Historical Perspectives on Culture,
Economy, and the City

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formative period between 1860 and 1900, in the conclusion I shall attempt to follow through trends over a longer period to gauge change and persistence in the cultural economy over time.

The Origins of the Cultural Economy

As we have just observed, prior to the mid-nineteenth century Manchester was not noted for its cultural life. Even W. Cooke Taylor, generally taken to be an apologist both for Manchester and the factory system, reported in 1842: »It is essentially a place of business, where pleasure is unknown as a pursuit, and amusements scarcely rank as secondary considerations« (Cooke Taylor 1842: 10). In this regard Manchester was little different from other towns and cities outside London, where polite culture ranked relatively low in the order of priorities behind business, often being confined to particular groups (the gentry, urban notables) and times of year (festivals, the »season«) (Borsay 1999; Money 1977). At Taylor's time of writing there existed nevertheless an established network of institutions and associations of polite culture in Manchester. They included scientific and learned societies, concerts and assemblies, subscription libraries, social clubs and art exhibitions (Kargon 1977; Seed 1988; Stancliffe 1938). More dense still, of course, was the undergrowth of institutions of popular culture, from the »free and easy« to the temperance association (Hewitt 1996; Joyce 1994). In 1849 the journalist Angus Bethune Reach noted how the streets around the Apollo music saloon were filled with the sounds of itinerant musicians, organ grinders and ballad singers, while »the melodious burst of a roaring chorus, surging out of the open windows of the Apollo, resounds loudly above the whole conglomeration of street noises« (Kidd 1996: 52).

However, if we restrict our perspective to bourgeois or »high« culture before the 1850s, then three characteristics are evident. Firstly, the associations of culture were private or semi-private: access could only be obtained by election and/or subscription. Of the Gentleman's Concerts in the early 1850s the musician and impresario Charles Hallé observed in his *Autobiography*, they were »an exclusive society. None but subscribers were admitted and no tickets sold« (Kennedy 1972: 138). Secondly, such bodies were non profit-making, albeit separate from rather than opposed to the market.

Thirdly, the majority of cultural associations tended to have no dedicated building or physical space; meetings were peripatetic, taking place in hotels or even pubs.⁴ Especially in its more respectable and bourgeois manifestations, then, culture remained for the most part a private and exclusive affair. Hence Richard Cobden's celebrated attack on Manchester's unreformed government in 1838, in the name of the »shopocracy«, extended from the city's political to its social and cultural institutions: »The tone which has so long prevailed in the government of the town has naturally enough pervaded all our institutions [...] and the retailer would find it, probably, almost as difficult to obtain admission to our clubs and our concerts, as he might to obtain the privilege of *entré* to the Queen's court« (Cobden 1838). Consequently, it is difficult to speak of a cultural economy in anything more than a very partial and limited sense in Manchester in the early and mid-nineteenth century.

From the early 1860s, however, this situation began to change. The Manchester Art Treasures Exhibition of 1857, the fine arts equivalent of the Great Exhibition of 1851 and attracting over a million visitors, is often taken to be the catalyst but its effects were transitory (Finke 1985). More important locally, and arising out of the Art Treasures event, was the foundation of the Hallé concerts which were to become a regular feature of Manchester cultural life by the 1860s. The Hallé was the first permanent, professional orchestra in Britain and its annual season of grand concerts, held during the winter months, rapidly became »one of the institutions of Manchester«, as a local periodical put it in 1868, a miraculous conjunction of high culture and high society: the concert hall on Hallé night was reported to be »the most gorgeous and dazzling sight that is anywhere to be seen in Manchester at one glance«.⁵ It was a position at the peak of the city's cultural life that the Hallé was to maintain for the next half-century and it helped to ensure that as early as 1861 the city possessed the largest number of professional musicians of any urban place outside London (Russell 2000). The Hallé attracted new audiences to the classical music concert, clerks, teachers and even manual workers on occasions such as the annual *Messiah*, alongside the elite families of the city and region.

4 This was not the case with some bodies such as the Royal Manchester Institution (1823), the Gentlemen's Concert Hall (1830) and the Manchester Athenaeum (1835) but even here the buildings tended to be multi-purpose, not the home of a single association.

5 The *Freelance*, January 5, 1867 and January 4, 1868.

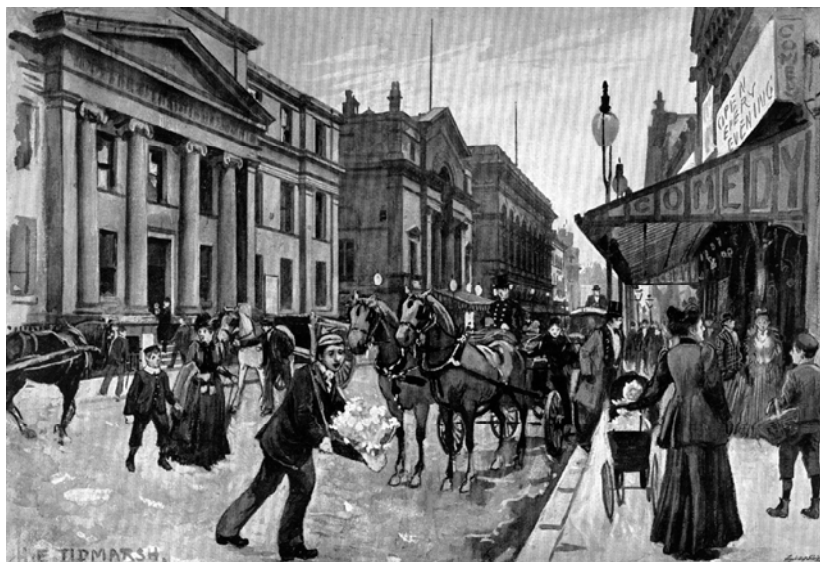


Fig. 1: Theatreland. Peter Street in 1890

(Source: Manchester Central Library Collections)

But as the quotation from *The Freelance* which prefaces this paper suggests, the expansion of »amusements« in the 1860s, both high and low, went well beyond the Hallé. Two new theatres, the Prince's and the Queen's, joined the Theatre Royal, the Gentlemen's Concert Hall and the Free Trade Hall in Peter Street. Music halls, including large-scale, purpose-built venues, such as the Alexandra and the London, likewise opened in the central area; in 1868 it was estimated that some 15,000 people flocked to these new »palaces« on any one night, not to mention the myriad small and generally less respectable halls in working-class districts. Factory workers, warehousmen, counting-house clerks and shop workers were all reported as making up the audiences for the new commercial entertainments.⁶ From the late 1860s, moreover, substantial new club-houses were under construction in Manchester, some political, others purely social, each with memberships ranging from several hundred to several thousand (Anon. 1888; Mills 1921). Connected to these or independent, there had also

6 *Freelance*, 25 January 1868.