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# **From *barbaric* noise to *beloved* melodies – an organ grinder and sonic identity of the city in nineteenth-century soundscape of Warsaw**

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## **Abstract:**

An organ grinder is an ambiguous figure in the soundscape of the nineteenth-century European city, yet quite a ubiquitous one. Although they are of different nationalities, these sonic urban nomads seem quite similar – male, impoverished, with an animal of some sort as a companion. The sound they produce marks the soundscape enough they *require* to be analysed.

Most of the time the sound, the melodies and the music of an organ grinder were considered *a noise* – loud, repetitive and of poor quality, they horrendously 'travested' popular opera hits of the time, they 'contaminated' the public sphere, and thus were something to be dealt with and regulated. Organ grinding aroused an array of negative feelings, from patronising contempt to utmost horror. The adequate language followed: *barbaric* noise, *uncivilised* sounds, *rough music* etc., and an absolute opposite of *art, music or talent*.

I would like, however, to focus on cases when an organ grinder was a welcomed guest and an anticipated visitor. Since my research project is about Warsaw at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth century, I will draw examples from this particular soundscape.

Not surprisingly, the distinction of how the inhabitants would approach an organ grinder is of a class – the musician was a welcomed guest mostly in poor districts of Warsaw. They would usually enter the well-shaped yard of the Warsaw tenement house and play – earning little money but much respect as they brought entertainment and culture to the toilsome everyday life. One more aspect is worth examining, which makes a Warsaw organ grinder different from, say, the London one: in the context of the city without autonomy under the Russian authority, an organ grinder – unintentionally, I guess – turned at times into a national hero, when playing religious songs and church antiphons.

## **Introduction – who is an organ grinder**

A Warsaw organ grinder is a figure who played a significant role in urban soundscape of the late nineteenth century. This is a story of how an idea of noise is socially constructed and how such a seemingly innocent social figure can truly charge the public debate. Lastly, it is also a story of who can claim the rights to public urban space and what might be the result of such endeavours .

First, it is worth trying to give as much information about their social background as possible. The picture is a jigsaw puzzle of different bits from daily and weekly newspapers, memoirs and visual sources. An organ grinder is always a man, usually middle-aged or elderly. Occasionally you could also meet a very young organ grinder which was a concern for local press:

[These are the boys] who apparently either detest any other occupation or believe this is a desirable way of living.

It is truly sad as playing a barrel organ is indeed a kind of beggary<sup>1</sup>.

In Warsaw it was quite an international group with Polish, Italian, German and Jewish organ grinders. They were usually from the poorest classes – I say usually, because some visual sources suggest otherwise, definitely indicating that it was not a homogenous group. Some organ grinders were disabled – blind or with a limb amputated – which made them look even more miserable and hence encourage more compassion.

Quite often they were accompanied with an animal, such as a monkey, a parrot or a guinea pig. The animal was obviously an extra attraction. Another bonus of an organ grinder was a horoscope and sometimes

for only 5 kopeks these trained animals would pull out from a bag a printed horoscope or a lifetime prophecy. The most real and infallible - as advertised - were the most popular<sup>2</sup>.

The repertoire of an organ grinder usually consisted of the latest hits – popular songs and pieces, arias from trendy operas and operettas, potpourries, which were kind of medleys from operas, folk and religious melodies. It is a rule of thumb that people like the songs they already know, and the nineteenth-century organ grinder was well aware of that.

The sound of an organ grinder was itinerant as they would move around the city, trying to find the most profitable spots and fleeing from where they were unwelcome:

In a hotel at Długa Street [in the city centre] for a few days now one guest spends the whole afternoon in his room and brings himself organ grinders who in turns play him various melodies.

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1 *Młodzi kataryniarze [Young organ grinders]*, „Kurier Codzienny”, rv 22, No 231, 22 August 1886, p. 2.

2 Józef Galewski, *Warszawa zapamiętana [Warsaw as I Remember]*, Warsaw 1961, p. 15.

A peculiar music lover, after he listened the whole repertoire of one organ grinder, pays him a rouble and requires another one with different repertoire. Happy with generous payment, the organ grinders besiege the hotel and want to get inside. Only yesterday between 2.00 and 5.00 in the afternoon four organ grinders played, each gifted with a rouble<sup>3</sup>.

A good place for them was a Warsaw well-type tenement house, where the music resonated and attracted the whole tenement house. They were not the only visitors in the yard – another musicians, street sellers and people offering their services would also come there, but this is a story for another occasion!

To summarise so far we can see that they were a constant part of a city soundscape but what was unusual about them is that they often changed places. Without telling whether it was an urban noise or not we can definitely say they were kind of „stubborn” - if you chased them away from one place they would pop up in another.

### **Constructing the idea of noise**

Quite intuitively we could say that such a spontaneous, not high quality music would be annoying and regarded as noise. Now, in sound studies noise is one of the trickiest categories as perception of noise is subjective and depends on social and cultural context<sup>4</sup>. In other words, whether we consider something „a noise” might differ dramatically from what other people believe. There are more or less sophisticated and nuanced definitions but for our purpose it is enough to say that noise is an unwanted sound which thus will evoke some negative emotions.

The following passage from a popular weekly magazine gives us an idea of how annoying an organ grinder could be:

An invention of barrel organs in one of these plagues, which people themselves created to torment their own kind. Can you think of something as unbearable as mechanical,

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<sup>3</sup> *Osobliwy meloman [A Peculiar Music Lover]*, „Kurier Warszawski”, No 144, 26 April 1896, p. 2.

<sup>4</sup> From a historical perspective some useful remarks on noise can be found for example in: Peter Bailey, *Breaking the Sound Barrier: A Historian Listens to Noise*, Aimée Boutin, *City of Noise. Sound and Nineteenth-Century Paris*, University of Illinois 2015, *Hearing History. A Reader*, ed. Mark M. Smith, University of Georgia 2004.

monotonous, repetitive music which is capable of making you fed up with your favourite melodies? (...) [This music] is the most severe disaster for anyone of an intellectual occupation. This unceasing clatter can bring the most tranquil person to despair. (...) You can't avoid this plague (...) You can't release yourself from the intruder<sup>5</sup>.

Organ grinder would be most annoying to those who seek peace and quiet and who, at the same time, possess some symbolic tools to eradicate an annoyance from their surrounding soundscape. In other words some people – let's call them middle class – would desire recalibrate an urban soundscape according to their wish (it is not that *they* move away but that the noise should move away). With Russian police and authorities the Varsovians might not influence the regulations directly, but they could put some pressure by writing in the newspapers.

And here I would like to show you some bits from various papers which show this desire to regulate city soundscape and the struggle to succeed.

[October 1878] Concession payment necessary, which seem to be „such a significant proportion of a city budget, the authorities are not willing to limit the business”. The newspaper propose the regulations:

1. Cannot play between 10.00 in the morning and 6.00 at night
2. Two organ grinders cannot play simultaneously in a distance less than 800 meters.
3. They cannot play in the yards if any tenant opposes.
4. If sick, an inhabitant can require an organ grinder to be removed from the nearest proximity of their flat for at least 400 meters.
5. If disobedient, an organ grinder should pay a fine and/or loose a concession<sup>6</sup> . .

[March 1878] A newspaper happy, the police issued limitations, very similar to their proposals<sup>7</sup>.

[December 1890] Organ grinders are not being punished for „disturbing public order”<sup>8</sup>

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5 „Bluszcz”, v. 6, No 22, 1 June 1870, p. 162

6 „Gazeta Polska, dawniej Codzienna”, v. 18, No 221, 3 October 1878, p. 2.

7 „Gazeta Polska, dawniej Codzienna”, No 55, 11 March 1879, p. 3.

8 *Zakłócenie spokoju [Disturbing Public Order]*, v. 26, No 355, 24 December 1890, p. 5.

[spring 1898] forbidden entrance to the Saski garden<sup>9</sup>

[summer 1898] organ grinders are leaving the city because courtyard concerts have been banned<sup>10</sup>

[March 1901] the police again issues limitations, adding that yard guards will be punished for letting organ grinders in<sup>11</sup>

[1907] failure of regulations

The number of organ grinders multiplied like 25 years ago. Now, they not only show up in the yards, but also take their toll in the streets and parks. In the Ujazdowski Avenue they stop in the pavement, next to benches<sup>12</sup>.

And this is the most tricky part when we study nineteenth century urban soundscapes. At first it seems that it was a predominantly noisy soundscape because the middle classes who seek peace and quiet would be the most willing to complain about noise. Using the most powerful medium of that time – a newspaper – a person who complained could influence opinions. In the same newspapers road works, reconstructions and improvements – although way more intrusive and inconvenient – were not considered a noise which prevents me from peacefully living in the city. Those who complain the most are people working intellectually and people aspiring to have any „musical taste” - both of these are quite paradoxical because it seems counterintuitive to seek peace and quiet living in a modernising bustling city and second – until 1901 Warsaw did not have a proper philharmonic hall and constant orchestra.

With a noise which evokes strong emotions we have this predominant notion that it must be – ideally – eradicated or at least pushed away, outside of my aural horizon. These melodies are not our melodies and we have nothing to do with them.

And to close this part of my presentation I want to also emphasise that with such a load of negative emotions organ grinder inevitably becomes a topic of numerous jokes, satires and

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9 *Ogród Saski [The Saski Garden]*, „Kurjer Codzienny”, v. 34, No 115, 15 April 1898, p. 1.

10 *Wędrowni muzycanci [Itinerant Musicians]*, „Kurjer Codzienny”, v. 34, No 167, 7 June 1898, p. 2.

11 *Muzyka na ulicach [Music in the Streets]*, „Kurjer Codzienny”, v. 37, No 88, 29 March 1901, p. 2.

12 *Katarynki [Barrel Organs]*, „Słowo”, v. 26, No 144, 1 June 1907, p. 3.

caricatures. He seems to be quite a helpless figure, poor, usually old – so it is an easy target for mockery. He would be patronised („how much talent do you actually need to be such a street musician?”<sup>13</sup>), treated with anger, contempt or pity. An organ grinder could even be used as an urban Baba Yaga with stories of organ grinders kidnapping children to force them into apprenticeship.<sup>14</sup>

### **Organ grinder, the bringer of Joy**

A picture of an organ grinder would be yet incomplete if we stopped here so let me now turn to the part where they are actually a form of entertainment. I have already mentioned that organ grinders were often spotted in the yards of tenement houses and I must say that most of the time they were a regular, awaited guests there. The fragment of these memories speaks for itself:

Around midday there were the most attractive visits. Most notably, an organ grinder. Organs were various - from ordinary to decorative - and organ grinders also differed - from poor old men to young well dressed Varsovians and Italians. Some of them, when entered the yard, seemed to be an embodiment of the highest culture.

Self-confident, in a huge hat, proudly looked around, set his place, moved a crank and played the sounds which would awake the dead. Children would jump around, dance and clap along to the music. And what a joy when the organ grinder sung some more bawdy songs!<sup>15</sup>

They were definitely awaited in poorer areas or tenement houses, where they were welcomed but definitely not paid well. For these people pleasant and catchy melodies from operettas – otherwise hardly accessible – would sound pleasantly, telling stories of love and affection. It was pure entertainment when community would gather around and we actually do have accounts – for example, memoirs – which say that it's a pity that organ grinder not always visits the poorest districts (as he knows he would earn little) where he would definitely bring joy.

Some daily newspapers, in the section of short announcements and latest news from the city, would sometimes publish feel-good stories of honest organ grinders or particularly miserable (which could provoke unharmed compassion).

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13 „Biesiada Literacka”, v. 40, No 35 (30 August 1895), p. 135 f.

14 *Porwanie chłopca [A Kidnapped Boy]*, „Kurjer Codzienny”, v. 38, No 74, 2 March 1902, p. 2.

15 Józef Galewski, *Warszawa zapamiętana [Warsaw as I Remember]*, Warsaw 1961, p. 14 .

Organ grinders were not *the only* street entertainment but seem to be one of the most attractive (remember about an animal and a horoscope!). Sometimes an organ grinder evokes feeling of nostalgia for the „old times” with melodies which trigger pleasant memories of the past. When reading the sources you can even feel that this music really captures the listeners' hearts – they stop their work to listen to the melodies; it's a momentary relief from their everyday labour.

An organ grinder could even – quite unintentionally, I guess – become a national hero, when he played popular religious pieces or „Polish” melodies. One such an organ grinder was captured in the city of Poznań, accused of „disturbing public order”. But he was a clever person and went to the local professor of music, who confirmed that the melody was an ancient, traditional melody and by no means it was meant to disturb public order, which in this case we should read as encouragement to national upheaval<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusions

It's time to summarise. In his book *Victorian Soundscapes* John Picker describes London organ grinders. He focuses on how their music was used to construct the idea of urban noise – organ grinders became a foreign (alien – usually Italian), savage (animal, from outside the British Empire), and intrusive force in Victorian society. Picker shows us how middle classes used this concept of noise to form their own identity of respectable, peace-loving people. He also points out their desire to separate themselves from annoyance and to clean public space (he even uses the word „sterilize”)<sup>17</sup>.

I agree with this and I notice similar ambitions in Warsaw. This is a recurring problem of modern urban soundscapes – the co-existence of groups with conflicting sonic tolerance and needs. It also happens in Warsaw, but when I compare the London organ grinder to Warsaw organ grinder it seems to me they are far less harmful, more like a friendly neighbourhood, local street musician, who from time to time would visit you in your yard.

So, I would like to finish with the picture of organ grinder which definitely shows this – a community gathering around, young and old, male and female, to listen to the melodies.

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16 „Kurjer Warszawski”, v. 80, No 204, 26 July 1900, p. 4.

17 John M. Picker, *Victorian Soundscape*, Oxford 2003, p. 79-81.



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