"Organ Grinder's Swing": representations of street music in New York City, 1850-1937

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Abstract
Between approximately 1850 and 1936, the barrel organ was one of the most commonly heard instruments in the streets of New York and the frequent subject of written, visual, and musical accounts created by middle class authors and artists. The instrument's loud, wheezy tunes inspired heated debates that began in the nineteenth century and were often aligned with the broader social upheavals caused by Italian immigration.

Despite their frequent differences in perspective, most written accounts characterized organ grinders as poor, uneducated, Italian immigrants. Musical representations of street music developed a similar proclivity to emphasize Italian alterity. As early as the 1850s, it was common to quote popular dance idioms to evoke street music, a trend that continued well into the early twentieth century in Tin Pan Alley songs. These strophic songs offered more elaborate portrayals of organ grinders, mimicking the dialect of Italian immigrants through clipped, misspelled syllables.

Street musicians declined in the twentieth century, but such stereotypes continued to resonate strongly within fictive musical portrayals. In Charles Ives' From Hanover Square North, the clashing quotations of a gospel hymn aurally signify the program's commuters and organ grinder, whose music animates the scene similar to a tableau found within Nathaniel Hawthorne's novel The House of Seven Gables. In contrast to Ives' idealistic conception of street music, Charles Cadman's opera The Willow Tree depicts a murderous street musician whose association with pleasant, Italian folk music does little to belie his unstable actions.

Mayor Fiorello La Guardia's 1936 decision to stop licensing organ grinders created a controversy that may have influenced representations of organ grinders in Marc Blitzstein's I've Got the Tune and the animated short Organ Grinder's Swing. The 1936 controversy suggested that not only were middle class audiences concerned with unprecedented waves of Italian immigration, they were also worried about an urban soundscape increasingly saturated with noise. It was these twin problems that led a class of educated New Yorkers to create meaning by reverting to ethnic, class-based stereotype.

Keywords
barrel organ, Charles Ives, organ grinder, street music

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Bibliography
Includes bibliographical references (pages 110-122).
"Organ Grinder’s Swing" (1937). Usually, theatrical cartoons have shied away from the politics of the time they were made. Thus, the cartoons do not become dated so quickly—and do not follow the progression from “dated” to “nostalgia” to “historical” that happens so often when topical references are used. To encapsulate: Organ-grinder Wimpy arrives at the square where Popeye and Olive live in adjoining apartments, with his street organ and his monkey. Popeye and Olive like the music, and offer Wimpy some change (and some hamburgers!). However, neighbor Bluto becomes demonstrative in his dislike of the music being offered. And it turns out that there’s a bit of New York City politics involved in this short, as well.