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The musical careers of the poor: the role of music as a vocational training for boys in British care institutions 1870–1918

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Little attention has been paid to the role of band music in the lives of young people in the first half of the twentieth century. For those in institutional care, musical education represented a rare opportunity to prepare for a specialist career in the armed forces. For the care institutions, the boys' band provided many benefits as it presented a positive exemplar of their reforming potential. There were also benefits for the boys themselves as band training offered them the prospect of a career as a bandsman in the army or navy and for a select minority the chance of promotion to bandmaster. The evidence from the boys' letters shows that they valued the intrinsic benefits of belonging to the band and learning an instrument. For some poor boys, musical education offered a relief from the rigours of institutional care in circumstances where there were few pleasures on offer.

Keywords: childhood; education; history; state; music; brass bands

Introduction

Publicity for the visit of the Simon Bolivar Youth Orchestra of Venezuela to London in April 2009 drew attention to the transformative effect that music education can have on the lives of poor children.¹ It is perhaps surprising that musical careers were open at all to the most deprived children of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Britain. Yet, from the 1870s until the early 1920s, training for entry to military bands represented an important vocational route for boys leaving care institutions, especially the larger poor law schools, children's homes, industrial schools and reformatories. Significantly, even the sternest critics of institutional provision regarded the band as a beneficial career for boys leaving care.² Inspectors, whether from the Local Government Board or the Home Office, praised the military band as 'the best opening of all for boys ... in which they invariably do well'.³ How did enlistment into a

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¹<http://news.bbc.co.uk>, November 28, 2005. For details of their concert programme for April 2009 at the Southbank Centre, London see <http://www.southbankcentre.co.uk/calendar/productions/simon-bolivar-youth-orchestra-38680> (accessed February 2, 2009).

²*Local Government Board Third Report, 1873–74 (and Tenth Report of Inspector of Alkali Works)*, British Parliamentary Papers 1874 xxv (C.1071), 311–48. Mrs Nassau Senior was critical of almost all aspects of poor law institutional provision for children, yet she writes on page 326, 'I could not but admire the provision made for the boys, by means of regular drill, and the cultivation of band music'.

³*Reports from Inspectors of Poor Law Schools*, British Parliamentary Papers 1901 xxv (746) No. 49, 183.

military or naval brass band become a significant vocational route for boys leaving institutional care? Was it, as some have argued, just a convenient and even cynical ‘method of disposal’ which suited the needs of both the care institutions and the British Army during a time of imperial expansion?⁴ Or did it offer a ‘chink of light’ in an otherwise grim upbringing by providing a ladder upwards of sorts for the talented and ambitious amongst those ‘forgotten’ children?⁵ And above all, did music education within the institution provide something more in terms of personal worth and creativity for the boys concerned?

The development of the ‘niche’ career in military music

There are no overall figures for the numbers of children in British care institutions during the period in question. By the turn of the century, there were between 100,000 and 125,000 children staying long term in care institutions of all sorts, including the smaller ‘dispersed’ homes, cottage homes, larger orphanages, poor law schools and hospitals and correctional schools.⁶ The largest group were in poor law institutions. T.J. Macnamara, in his 1908 report *Children under the Poor Law* referred to 60,421 ‘indoor pauper children’, of whom nearly 20,000 were in London.⁷ Not all of these children were parentless, though only a minority had both parents living. In the metropolis, very large children’s institutions were established in the nineteenth century, known as ‘barrack’ schools, to provide for long-term inmates without the prospect of return to their families. Even the ‘cottage’ homes, such as the Banstead Homes established by Kensington and Chelsea Union, contained more than 700 children on one site, even if they lived in separate houses.⁸ Correctional institutions (reformatories and industrial schools) catered for a second significant group of children aged seven and above, though most were over 10 years of age. These were overwhelmingly boys committed for minor offences or truancy by the courts for periods of 18 months to seven years. Numbers in such correctional institutions peaked around the turn of the century, when Home Office figures show there were just over 30,000 inmates.⁹ A third group encompassed all those children committed voluntarily to private institutions, such as Dr Barnardo’s, the Methodists’ National Children’s Home and Orphanage, the Church of England Waifs and Strays Society or the equivalent Roman Catholic societies.¹⁰ For most of these groups of children, in whatever type of institution, their experience of care was of a disciplined and regulated

⁴Charles Nalden, *Half and Half: The Memoirs of a Charity Brat, 1908–1989* (Wellington, NZ: Moana Press, 1989), 213.

⁵John Springhall, *Youth, Empire and Society: British Youth Movements 1883–1940* (London: Croom Helm, 1977), 170.

⁶Roy A. Parker, *Away from Home: a History of Child Care*, a Barnardo’s practice paper (Ilford, Essex: Barnardo’s, 1990), 4.

⁷T.J. Macnamara, *Children under the Poor Law: A Report to the President of the Local Government Board*, British Parliamentary Papers 1908 xcii (Cd. 3899), 459.

⁸Peter Higginbotham, *Kensington & Chelsea School District, Banstead Cottage Homes*, <http://www.workhouses.org.uk> (accessed October 9, 2008).

⁹*Forty-Fourth Report of the Inspector of Reformatory and Industrial Schools of Great Britain for 1900 Pt II*, Home Office, British Parliamentary Papers 1902 xlvii (Cd. 840), 490.

¹⁰Voluntary institutions cared for smaller numbers of children; for instance, Waifs and Strays had nearly 3000 children in its care in 1900, rising to 4300 by 1912, but this included boys at their industrial school and children funded by poor law unions, see <http://www.hiddenlives.org.uk/annualreports> (accessed October 9, 2008).

institutional life, often lacking in individual love and attention, though by the end of the century with adequate standards of physical care.¹¹ Uniforms, short haircuts and silence at meals were the norm in the correctional schools and the whole day was planned according to a timetable of duties with restricted time allowed for recreation. Discipline was firm, harsh in some places, as Richard Knight recalled of his experience in Stanhope Industrial School in Kent in the early 1930s: ‘At Stanhope right is right and wrong is wrong and there is nothing in between.’¹²

Their prospects for employment placed these boys and girls at the bottom of the social scale. Most were educationally behind their peers in the ordinary elementary school and many were physically stunted through poverty, illness or poor nutrition and thus they ended up in unskilled jobs with few prospects. For girls, there was little option other than domestic service, which was at least regarded as respectable and suitable for those with the lowest expectations. For boys, agricultural labouring or the services were the two major exit routes at age 14. A minority of boys were trained in traditional craft skills, such as carpentry, tailoring or shoemaking, but it was often difficult for them to obtain apprenticeships, which had to be paid for, or to find accommodation during the early years of work since the pay of an apprentice was very low, certainly not enough to pay for lodgings.¹³ About a third returned to their families or relatives where they would be expected to contribute to family income straight away and this would mean they took up casual or unskilled work. Many of those responsible for managing children’s institutions believed that a return to home circumstances was detrimental, due to the ‘evil surroundings’ of the poor slum environments or the influence of ‘worthless’ parents which would drag them down after years of careful training to live an upright life – i.e. one which was not likely to lead them to apply for poor relief or end up in trouble with the law.¹⁴

Thus enlistment into the services fitted the bill in terms of an acceptable career for boys leaving the care of the orphanage, home, industrial school or reformatory. They were away from likely temptations near their families and ‘looked after’ in an institutional setting similar to that of the children’s home or correctional school, which would keep them on the straight and narrow. They were also usefully employed in the service of the Crown, to which no highly moral middle-class Poor Law Guardian or school manager could possibly object. Of those joining the Army or Navy, perhaps a fifth or more gained entry to regimental bands. At Portslade Industrial School near Brighton on the south coast of England, 44% of all the boys discharged or licensed out between 1902 and 1912 joined regimental bands, and in the latter years it was 50% or

¹¹John S. Hurt, ‘Reformatory and Industrial Schools before 1933’, *History of Education* 13, no. 1 (March 1984): 51–3; *Report of the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, Vol.1, British Parliamentary Papers 1896 xlv (8204), 14; Lydia D. Murdoch, *Imagined Orphans: Poor Families, Child Welfare and Contested Citizenship in London* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 55–61.

¹²Mary B. Wall, ‘Richard’s Story’ accessed from *The Industrial Schools Home Page*, <http://www.missing-ancestors.com> (accessed March 18, 2008).

¹³This problem was overcome by some schools and homes by the opening of ‘auxiliary homes’ to lodge young workers aged 14–18 on leaving care.

¹⁴*Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools* (B.P.P. 1896), 87; Parker, *Away from Home*, 37–46.

more of all leavers.¹⁵ The lack of much alternative vocational provision at the Brighton school was partly the reason for its strong commitment to band training and the significant numbers going into military bands on leaving. By contrast, only 11% of boys from Desford Industrial School in Leicester enlisted as army musicians between 1903 and 1912, which illustrates the variability in schools' and homes' vocational bias.¹⁶ Nonetheless, this evidence would still imply that thousands of recruits with musical training came into military bands from children's homes, reformatories and industrial schools between 1870 and 1918. Of course, some boys dropped out early on, or were persuaded to by their families, a practice that school and home managers frequently lamented.¹⁷ But of all those enlisting from care institutions, the bandsmen were considered the most successful group of all. This is evident not only from the investment put into musical education, but from the many examples quoted by school managers and school inspectors of boys who had risen to become bandmasters or senior regimental musicians.

The number of army bands in existence at the turn of the century was at least 150 and even in the 1920s Charles Nalden, a former inmate of the Thomas Coram Foundling Hospital in London, refers to 140 bands with approaching 6000 bandsmen employed by the Army alone.¹⁸ This is not including the naval bands, bands of the Royal Marines and, after 1918, Royal Air Force bands. The systematic training of home-grown bandsmen began after the Crimean War, during which a discordant attempt to have several regimental bands render the national anthem en masse highlighted the weaknesses of the British as against the French bands.¹⁹ Of course, youngsters from respectable and even affluent homes enlisted in regimental bands and there were elite schools, such as the Duke of York's and the Royal Hibernian Military School in Dublin, which provided a preparatory education for military musicians along the lines of a boarding school.²⁰ For most working-class boys such an education was out of the question. Opportunities and time for most working-class boys to learn an instrument were in practice limited, even if they had the support of parents and relatives with informal tuition or joined an organisation such as the Boys' Brigade and played regularly after school. The purchase of an instrument for a child was beyond the resources of most working-class families. By contrast, children's homes and correctional schools were well placed to provide the necessary training. An 1892 Report on the work of the Royal Military School of Music, which trained the elite of regimental musicians, listed 29 poor law institutions as their prime recruiting grounds and recognised the quality and range of training given at each of these children's homes

¹⁵Brighton Corporation Education Committee School Accommodation, Industrial Schools and Blind and Deaf Schools Sub-Committee (hereafter CEC) minutes Vol. 3, facing page 49, *Annual Reports of the Superintendent of Portslade Industrial School 1903–12*, Tenth Annual Report, 1911 (East Sussex Archives, Lewes, UK – hereafter ESA).

¹⁶*Evidence Given to the Consultative Committee on Practical Work in Secondary Schools*, British Parliamentary Papers 1913, xx (6838), 270; Lydia Murdoch notes that 23% of boys leaving metropolitan poor law schools in 1895 joined bands – Murdoch, *Imagined*, 137.

¹⁷Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 313, Fourth Annual Report, 1905.

¹⁸Nalden, *Half*, 205.

¹⁹Marcher, *And in the Beginning There Was: the Royal Naval School of Music*, <http://www.royalmarinesbands.co.uk/history/RNSM.1.htm> (accessed February 29, 2008).

²⁰Report by the Commandant, Royal Military School of Music 1892', in *Kneller Hall Historical Records 1856–1934* (Kneller Hall Archives, Twickenham, UK – hereafter KHAT), 3.

and schools.²¹ In fact, so close was the relationship between the care institutions and the Army that ordinary boys with less musical training found it difficult to compete, even though their backgrounds were more ‘respectable’ than either the pauper or industrial school boys. Major R. Holden, writing in a letter to *The Times* in October 1895 complained, ‘the parents of the lads in our Cadet Battalion pay rates and taxes for the musical education of boys of bad character, thereby enabling them to gain advantages over their own sons who wish to enter the bands of the Army, and this statement is beyond question’.²² The children’s institutions had spotted a niche in the employment market which they were peculiarly fitted to fill – not only did they have at their disposal much more of the boys’ time but they could justify the investment in a bandmaster’s salary and the purchase of instruments with the assurance that most of those trained would proceed into the Army without interference from their parents.

Regimental bands generally recruited boys at age 14 and trained them up to an acceptable standard themselves, but a rudimentary musical training enabled them to put the boy player immediately into the band. The best players went on at age 18 to the Royal Military School of Music at Kneller Hall in Twickenham, or the equivalent naval institution at Deal in Kent. Here they trained to a very high standard, tackling arrangements of classical music and complex solo pieces. The ablest trained in their twenties or early thirties to become bandmasters.²³ Inevitably some of these boys had joined from a children’s home or industrial school and were subsequently celebrated by their former home or school as an example to others. The 1903 Annual Report from Portslade records ‘FCL, [a former inmate and now] a Bandmaster in one of our ... [Industrial] Schools, is studying for a musical degree; his pupils are making wonderful progress; has aspirations and will not be content until he has the management of a school himself’.²⁴ Regimental bandmasters recognised the quality of entrants with this musical training as well as the convenience of recruiting from an institution ‘en masse’. Not only were these boys well schooled in the simpler marches and had learned to sight-read musical notation as preparation for the military band; they were also prepared for the rigid discipline and institutional life into which they were enlisting.²⁵ The reason for the relative ‘success’ of children from care institutions in gaining entry to regimental bands must be traced therefore to the ways in which the care institutions themselves both promoted and integrated military music and band training into their regimes and to the relationship they formed with the regimental bandmasters.

The popularity of military bands in British care institutions

Britain’s expanding imperial role towards the end of the nineteenth century and the rising military competition between European states both tended towards greater public

²¹‘Report by the Commandant, 1892’ (KHAT), 4 shows a list including poor law institutions representing all the large London Unions and many from the Home Counties, including Reading in Berkshire and Brighton in East Sussex.

²²*The Times*, October 17, 1895 – one of a series of letters on the subject. The reputation of the industrial school boys was robustly defended by the Chairman of the London School Board Industrial Schools Committee.

²³‘Report by the Commandant, 1892’ (KHAT), 1–3; Gordon Turner and Alwyn W. Turner, *The Trumpets Will Sound: The Story of the Royal Military School of Music, Kneller Hall* (Tunbridge Wells: Parapress, 1996).

²⁴Brighton CEC minutes (ESA), Vol. 1, facing page 111, Second Annual Report, 1903.

²⁵Nalden, *Half*, 189.

pride in the Army's role and promoted public awareness of and respect for the armed services at home. Military pageant and regular public displays of military marching bands promoted support for the establishment of boys' bands as well as adult ones. These trends particularly affected children because of fears about the future of the British race which had emerged in the Boer War due to the poor levels of fitness of recruits. There was therefore a concern to produce from the poor urban child population both healthy and loyal soldiers to defend the Empire of the future.²⁶ The introduction of Empire Day in 1902 as a day of celebration for schools went alongside the teaching of patriotic duty in elementary schools as the first obligation of the British citizen.²⁷ Playing in a military band appeared to address many of these concerns, since it was likely to promote physical fitness while drilling the children in the discipline required of the future soldiers of the Empire. Military brass bands, seen as the elite and the pattern for all civilian bands, were increasingly invited to play at social occasions, to entertain the masses in the expanding seaside resorts and to take part in civic processions.

Brass band music also broadened its appeal as a 'popular' form of entertainment during the second half of the nineteenth century. Thousands of bands were formed in towns and villages across the country, as part of a growing 'associational culture'.²⁸ Some were factory and workplace bands, encouraged and financially supported by employers, whilst many were associated with the Volunteer Corps and therefore had semi-military associations. The popular enthusiasm for forming brass bands had been boosted by the supply of cheaper instruments available on instalment payments. Brass bands became strongly associated with mining communities, offering opportunities for boys and men to earn extra money from prize competitions and paid appearances, but this did not provide an alternative to their main employment. Whilst brass banding was sometimes characterised by heavy drinking, often at competitive events, it also featured strongly as a vehicle for promoting religious and temperance views, most significantly via the bands of the Salvation Army.²⁹ Thus the training of poor boys in care institutions as brass and wind players in their own marching bands placed them firmly within a working-class musical tradition and culture, but one which was not generally seen as threatening to social or political order.³⁰

Virtually all care institutions with significant numbers of boys had a military band by the turn of the century. In a boys' home or correctional school, the band provided a number of benefits. Most obviously, it reinforced habits of discipline amongst the boys – the routines of marching, cleaning their instruments, keeping their uniforms smart and playing in chapel or at other events in the life of the home (such as prize-giving) all gave out the message that deference and orderliness were important. For the school, a band was an essential means of promotion, both to benefactors and in the local community. This was especially important for the correctional schools, which were usually known locally as 'schools for bad boys'. Turning out for a local fête or

²⁶Brad Beaven and John Griffiths, 'Creating the Exemplary Citizen: the changing notion of citizenship in Britain 1870–1939', *Contemporary British History* 22, no. 2 (2008): 208–11.

²⁷Stephen Heathorn, *For Home, Country and Race: Constructing Gender, Class and Englishness in the Elementary School, 1880–1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2000), 28.

²⁸Trevor Herbert, ed., *The British Brass Band: A Musical and Social History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 34–6.

²⁹Herbert, ed., *Brass Band*, 36–42; Alf Hailstone, *British Bandsman Centenary Book: A Social History of Brass Bands* (Baldock: Egon Publishers, 1987), 9–24, 89–100.

³⁰Herbert, ed., *Brass Band*, 64–7.

parade offered a contrary impression of the boys, one of discipline and self-control, which promoted the school's claim to reform them.³¹ A school band was also a way of illustrating to all the children in the institution the values of loyalty and obedience to the Crown and to national ideals, which the band boys themselves were expected to fulfil by their enlistment. However, this should not be overstressed, as patriotic fervour was rarely spoken of as the main reason for having a band. The main concern of school and home managers was to keep boys from returning to homes which they thought were full of temptations to crime or would drag them down into poverty.

Music education and vocational training in the institution

The Superintendent of Desford Industrial School reported in 1913 to a Board of Education enquiry into practical education on the value of the band to his school.

Music had a very refining influence, and boys were not chosen for the band on account of any capacity or talent they might have, but solely on the grounds of their home circumstances. By this means a boy whose home was unsatisfactory would eventually be drafted into the army and entirely separated from his home. In spite of this, in 15 years only six boys had been rejected from the band as being incompetent to continue a musical training.³²

Desford was unusual in not seeking any musical aptitude from those joining the band, even though boys there were also taught to be soloists. But elsewhere, it seems that enthusiasm was the first requirement for joining the band. However, it did not mean that the standard attained by the boys was low. Although there was certainly variability in the quality of training, the standard reached by many boys' bands was good enough to satisfy recruiting regimental bandmasters. The boys in the band spent a surprisingly large portion of each day on music. In 1874, the Band at Sutton School, a large poor law institution on the outskirts of London, numbered 70 boys, of whom 30 were learners. The local government inspector reported that these boys 'devote[d] themselves entirely to music and school work with the exception of three hours in the tailors' shop per week'.³³ At Portslade, half-time schooling from the age of 12 was combined with full band practice for an hour every morning, plus the rest of each morning for the bandmaster to teach small groups of instrumentalists.³⁴ Portslade paid its bandmaster as much as the schoolmaster and his status in the institution was probably higher because of his role in securing employment for the boys when they left.³⁵ Money for instruments was always short – old instruments were frequently repaired rather than replaced but the range of instruments, both brass and wind, was impressive. Figure 1 shows the boys' band from Banstead cottage homes in Sutton, Surrey established by the Kensington and Chelsea Poor Law Union in the 1870s. The quality of the band training can be inferred from the range of instruments in the

³¹*Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools* (B.P.P. 1896), 24 refers to declining prejudices against industrial school boys playing at events outside the school.

³²*Evidence on Practical Work in Secondary Schools* (B.P.P. 1913), 269.

³³*L.G.B. Third Report, 1873–74* (B.P.P. 1874), 294.

³⁴Report of visit of Chief Inspector of Reformatories and Industrial Schools to Portslade 26 May 1925 (British National Archives, Kew, HO45/20006/430100/9).

³⁵Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol.1, 321, Report of Income and Expenditure of Portslade IS; (BNA) HO45/20006/430100/5 Letter from Colonel Levita to Sir John Baird dated May 20, 1922 on recruitment of a new bandmaster for Portslade.



Figure 1. Banstead Homes Boys' Band, 1902. © Peter Higginbotham.

photograph – flute, clarinet, oboe, cornet, French horn, saxophone, euphonium and bombardon (a tuba-like instrument), as well as drums and cymbals, were all in use.

Banstead was one of the homes from which Kneller Hall drew its boy musicians. Some care institutions also had string bands, making the boys even more versatile.³⁶ It is also clear that many bandmasters gave talented players individual tuition to develop their students' musical abilities and improve their career prospects.³⁷ This is referred to many times in the letters adult bandsmen wrote to their former school at Portslade near Brighton.

Taking the average of solo performers you will not find another lot out of one School to do the same as ours. (Corporal H.S., 1st Middlesex Regiment, India, 18th June, 1903)³⁸

Very glad to let you know that all the old boys are doing wonderfully well and all enjoying the best of health. They are all on solo instruments, Langstead, solo E flat clarinet; Roney, B flat ditto; Chase, oboe; Orchard, solo B flat cornet.... (Corporal W.J.L., Band, 4th Rifle Brigade, Malta, 20th June 1908)³⁹

³⁶For example, the training ship 'Exmouth' at Grays, Essex, which trained boys in brass, reeds, flutes and stringed instruments – see 'Report by the Commandant, 1892' (KHAT), 4.

³⁷Nalden, *Half*, 187.

³⁸Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 111, Second Annual Report, 1903.

³⁹Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 2, facing page 165, Seventh Annual Report, 1908.

The investment in time, staffing and resources was justified by the care institutions because of its vocational intent. General school work was often sacrificed in favour of band training and the status accorded the band members meant they were given special privileges. Members of the National Children's Home's Farnborough Industrial School band received extra presents at Christmas and, together with choirs from the NCH, travelled extensively to entertain at official fundraising events for the voluntary society.⁴⁰ The London Foundling Hospital band in which Charles Nalden played led the local schoolchildren in procession to the local Barnet fair, and in Nalden's words, for that reason the boys were allowed to enjoy 'the fun of the fair, in addition to a liberal supply of food, the like of which we had not tasted for many a year'.⁴¹ The following quotation from the Annual Report for 1905 from Portslade Industrial School near Brighton illustrates the range of engagements in which a good boys' band could be involved.

The Band, brass and reed, maintains its good reputation, being locally engaged last season at fetes, bazaars, sports, cricket matches, garden parties, flower shows, and was again selected to play on the Hove Lawns, while the usual military band was occupied at the volunteer camp. It is more than a useful auxiliary for passing boys into the army, in fact, the best means of disposal; our connection with certain regiments being quite a mutual appreciation.⁴²

There is a note of satisfaction at the end of the comment which highlights the main interest of the school in training its young bandsmen – the access to employment in regimental bands. It is clear that children's homes and correctional schools regarded the band training not just as a useful and enjoyable promotional tool or a way of generating pride and discipline amongst the boys. They were in the serious business of ensuring that the boys got employment in the regimental bands.⁴³

In fact, the 'mutual appreciation' between military bandmasters and the bandmaster in school referred to in the Portslade example is a polite reference to the well-known practice by regimental bandmasters of 'greasing the palm' of the school bandmaster when he visited to encourage the latter to recommend the most talented boys. Not surprisingly there was a hierarchy of bands and some competition for those schools with reputations for producing the best instrumentalists.⁴⁴ Charles Nalden describes the regimental bandmasters as 'driven by the harsh realities of Service life which bade them populate their bands or perish. Their business techniques were remarkably little removed in style from those of the slave marketers of early Rome.'⁴⁵

⁴⁰Farnborough Industrial School Log Book 1912–53, 6 (NCH archive, University of Liverpool Special Collections, D541 J31/3/1/ – hereafter NCHA).

⁴¹Nalden, *Half*, 190–1.

⁴²Brighton CEC minutes. Vol. 1, facing page 313, Fourth Annual Report, 1905.

⁴³Brighton CEC minutes. Vol. 2, facing page 37, Sixth Annual Report, 1907, 8 records, 'The Band is regarded as ... a branch of Industrial training, and not kept up solely for recreative purposes'.

⁴⁴*Poor Law Schools* (B.P.P. 1901), 83, Report No. 49 by Byam Davies, 'so much are they sought after that the regimental bandmasters come back for recruits year after year to the same school'.

⁴⁵Nalden, *Half*, 213.

Boys' views of the military band as a career route

But were the boys unwitting pawns in a sort of musical 'supply system' to keep the British Army in bandsmen, as Nalden implies? How did they view their music education and their destiny as military bandsmen? Nalden's own expression of helplessness belies the fact that he actually refused an offer to join one regimental band so that he could go for a more prestigious one, the Royal Artillery Mounted Band.⁴⁶ In his memoir published in 1989, he condemned almost every aspect of his harsh and sterile upbringing in the Foundling Hospital, with its 'atmosphere of strict isolation from the outside world ... of servility, of being liable to receive a caning for the most trivial offence, of undertaking without question every menial task demanded of one'.⁴⁷ Yet of his music education, he wrote, 'band practice was the one school session which never palled, and which sped by all too rapidly'.⁴⁸ Nalden was a gifted musician but his experience was by no means an isolated one. There is evidence that music provided the opportunity for creativity and self-expression so lacking in all other aspects of institutional life. For the managers, it could be seen as an outlet for lively spirits and best suited to some of the lads who were in other respects the most difficult to control. Certainly more than one bandsman in later life believed that his membership of the band had kept him from slipping into delinquency or worse. Corporal F. Etherton, of the 1st Royal Sussex Regiment, writing from India to his former school bandmaster at Portslade clearly showed his appreciation that he had been given a chance by joining the band.

I remember the time when I wanted to learn an instrument, when you wanted some more for the band, you said that I couldn't do it, I had only twelve months to stay at the School.... If you had not taken me in the band, where should I be now, perhaps running the streets.⁴⁹

Some kept up their training and even learned new instruments on joining the Army, as in this extract from an old boy's letter to Portslade from 1904.

Although I am only a bugler, I am not neglecting the music; I know you would not like me to lose my music.... I am learning the violin and when I get the chance I go in for the piano ... it is a thing I have always wanted to learn.⁵⁰

And of course, the boys did still exercise a choice about whether to join the Army when they left. The Superintendent of Portslade in 1904 congratulated himself on the numbers who had enlisted in the previous two years, but he also noted a group who joined simply for the enjoyment of playing and belonging to the band.

For some inexplicable reason there seems just now a disposition among several of the musically trained boys *not* to enlist in Military Bands; I am afraid they join the Band for its present attractions rather than for its more remote advantages.⁵¹

⁴⁶Nalden, *Half*, 213–14.

⁴⁷Nalden, *Half*, 214.

⁴⁸Nalden, *Half*, 189.

⁴⁹Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 313, Fourth Annual Report, 1905.

⁵⁰Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 189, Third Annual Report, 1904.

⁵¹Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 189, Third Annual Report, 1904.

The enthusiasm to join may of course have had something to do with the prestige of the band, the smart uniforms they wore and its regular visits outside the institution – but, like Nalden, many of the boys also enjoyed learning to play and performing for its own sake. The recreational role of music in care institutions is little documented, because inspectors and school staff concentrated their attention on the job prospects of the boys. Yet the enjoyment experienced by Charles Nalden is evident also in the letters of the adult bandmen and in the enthusiasm of boys to join the band. For girls, the scope for musical training was limited to choral practice. Both children’s homes and poor law schools included girls in their choirs; some, such as the National Children’s Home included girls in a choir which travelled extensively to fundraise for the organisation.⁵² However, there was no equivalent musical occupational route open to girls.

Portslade’s Annual Reports for 1902–1912 included a review of every boy’s progress for the first three years after leaving. The comments make clear the relative success of the boy bandmen compared with those placed on farms or even in local businesses. ‘Since May, 1902, 26 well-trained musicians have been sent into the Service, and not a single complaint has been received respecting their efficiency and behaviour.’⁵³ Of course, this is merely confirming that the boys had done as required by leaving behind the influences of their families and going abroad with the Army, often to far-flung parts of the Empire. It reveals nothing about those who did not write to their former school or home, other than that they stayed in the Army or Navy.

Boy bandmen in the context of the history of children in care

There is a distinct contrast between the authorities’ perception of the value of this vocational route and that of the children themselves. Whilst the authorities saw the military band as a means of ensuring boys did not return to their ‘old lives’, the boys themselves were more interested in secure employment and the opportunity to develop their talents and skills. Historians have been critical in their judgements of the treatment of institutionalised children, and rightly so.⁵⁴ However, little attention has been paid to the value of music education in such care institutions or to judging whether the vocational route it supported was beneficial for the boys concerned.

In her book *Imagined Orphans*, Lydia Murdoch reviews the ways in which care institutions prepared children for entry to employment and life in the outside world critically against the moralistic paradigm adopted by virtually all those involved in the management and inspection of children’s homes and correctional schools. She contrasts the authorities’ aim that employment of the children should ‘physically and morally distance them from their impoverished parents’ with the ‘economic and personal motives’ of parents and children themselves.⁵⁵ For the boys, finding a secure career was a matter of survival and beyond that of being able to render support to their families.⁵⁶ Murdoch argues that the moral concerns of the authorities, however, meant that they prepared children for types of employment ‘ill suited to the late-Victorian

⁵²Farnborough Log Book, p. 6 (NCHA).

⁵³Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol. 1, facing page 111, Second Annual Report, 1903.

⁵⁴Jon Lawrence and Pat Starkey, eds, *Child Welfare and Social Action in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries: International Perspectives* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001); Hurt, ‘Industrial Schools’.

⁵⁵Murdoch, *Imagined*, 121.

⁵⁶Brighton CEC minutes (ESA). Vol. 2, facing page 37, Sixth Annual Report, 1907.

and Edwardian economy' and that the training provided was often of poor quality.⁵⁷ She criticises the military route because boys were sent so far away from their homes and families and it is clear from comments of the authorities that some parents opposed their sons' entry into the Army, preferring them to return home.⁵⁸

It is true that the options for children leaving care institutions in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century were intentionally restricted. This was certainly resented by Charles Nalden in his memoir of life in the Foundling Hospital.

I find it quite sad ... when I reflect back upon those things which might have been; the sort of careers our many bright young children might have followed had they been given opportunity of developing their natural and individual talents.⁵⁹

This was a man who in later life rose to become Professor of Music at Auckland University. Of course, it was also true that the prospects even for the fortunate ones with musical ability were limited to the military sphere. The authorities, although acting from motives which *were* anti-family, nevertheless offered the boys both an education and prospects which were at least as good as they could have achieved if they had grown up in an ordinary working-class family. The pride taken in the boys' achievements is apparent from the Annual Reports of the Portslade School.

G.B., G.H.R., T.R., now at Deal as pupils at the Royal Naval School of Music; they are making good progress on their respective brass instruments; also receiving instruction with the idea of entering the string band. Conduct satisfactory.... The reports respecting those who have chosen a musical career are most encouraging. Two of them are at Knellar Hall; one gained the Harmony Prize, and I think he will be heard of again.⁶⁰

This is a sign that aspirations, though within a limited horizon, were high.

The critical 'missing element' for the boy bandmen was not the lack of a secure career opportunity. It was the lack of individual care and family support which the care institution was unable to provide. Critics of institutional care from the 1870s onwards pointed out that children often emerged unable to cope well with life outside the school or home, that they lacked initiative or were insecure emotionally.⁶¹ Nalden refers to the 'sense of inferiority, which in turn made us unsure of ourselves'.⁶² They lived a life of unrelenting discipline with little choice over their futures. Even a good musical education with a bandmaster who exercised care and nurtured the children's abilities would not have compensated entirely for the experience of institutional care and the loss of family life.

Nonetheless, some flourished under the individual care of a bandmaster with a real enthusiasm for music and an ability to inspire children. For those with talent it was an unusual opportunity, and for those with only a modicum of ability but enough application, band training represented a secure career route. Admission to a military career in the band did offer poor boys who *in any case* would have had very limited opportunities in life a viable and even rewarding career route for which they were well

⁵⁷Murdoch, *Imagined*, 127–8.

⁵⁸Murdoch, *Imagined*, 139; Brighton CEC minutes (ESA). Vol. 1, facing page 313, Fourth Annual Report, 1905, 5 refers to cases of 'parental interference'.

⁵⁹Nalden, *Half*, 208.

⁶⁰Brighton CEC minutes (ESA) Vol 1, facing page 407, Fifth Annual Report, 1906.

⁶¹Macnamara, *Children under the Poor Law* (B.P.P. 1908), 4.

⁶²Nalden, *Half*, 217.

prepared, not only in terms of their musical training but also their institutional background. The real test of the band training came not when the boys joined the military, but when they left it. It was a known and admitted weakness of the military route that boys could do well in the Army but then, on discharge in their early forties, were sometimes incapable of adapting to a life without the constant structure of orders and discipline. They often ended up in jail or in the workhouse, but this was less characteristic of former bandmen. Though Nalden refers to the problems experienced on discharge by some of his fellow musicians, they tended to fare somewhat better in 'civvy street' than the ordinary ex-soldiers. Even whilst in the Army, playing in a dance band or at local social events provided a lucrative sideline and there were opportunities for the best instrumentalists to move into a career as a professional musician on leaving the services. Some, like Nalden, who had trained as a bandmaster at the Royal Military School of Music, became serious and respected musicians in their own right.⁶³

Conclusion

There is much evidence that the priority of those running children's homes and correctional schools was to ensure boys had good employment prospects. This priority was framed within a set of class-based and moralistic beliefs. Moreover, it often involved a negative judgement of the families of the children in their care. Nonetheless, despite these low and limited expectations, music education provided for the boys involved a viable and valuable vocational route offering the most talented an opportunity for career progression. For the care institutions, band training was the most successful 'method of disposal' for boys, as the careers of those who wrote to their old schools and homes testified. However, it was also more than that to the boys themselves and to their teachers and carers, who often harboured high aspirations for those with talent and enthusiasm. Furthermore, playing in the band provided enjoyment and an outlet for youthful exuberance as well as opportunities to perform outside the institution and enjoy the prestige of belonging to a select group. There is much that can be criticised in the regime of institutional care, and indeed there was criticism at the time. However, the letters from 'old boys' demonstrate that their music education provided something of intrinsic and lasting value for many of these 'forgotten' children and for the adults they became.⁶⁴ To that extent, this evidence offers a corrective to the universally gloomy portrayal of the lives of children in care in the past. It perhaps also suggests that, whatever the constraints, the experience of making music and learning to play is one which can have a positive and even transformative effect for children, however dire their circumstances.

Notes on contributor

Nicola Sheldon completed her doctorate at Oxford University in 2007 specialising in the history of truancy. Her post-doctoral work has concentrated on the development of institutional care of children in England from 1880–1939. Since January 2009 she has been working on the History in Education Project at the Institute of Historical Research, University of London.

⁶³Nalden, *Half*, 205–7.

⁶⁴For official criticisms of some industrial schools and reformatories, see *Report on Reformatory and Industrial Schools* (B.P.P.1896) and *Report of the Departmental Committee on Reformatory and Industrial Schools*, British Parliamentary Papers 1913 xxxix (6838).