

# Introduction

## Prologue

Towards the end of writing this book during the summer of 2015 we attended the Musicians' Union's (MU's) thirty-sixth Biennial Conference in Brighton. By this point, having pored through conference reports dating back to 1943,<sup>1</sup> we were all too familiar with the nature and concerns of such gatherings and our attendance presented an obvious opportunity to reflect on the differences and similarities between the current machinations of the Union and those evident throughout the history we had just written.

The conferences are arguably the most visible representation of the Union's concerns at any given point, as its Executive Committee (EC) reports on the organisation's work and delegates put forward motions supporting or critiquing this work, while also having the opportunity to change Union policy.

We observed that of the many changes the most apparent are in the demographics and dynamics of the conference. This is visible amongst both the delegates on the conference floor and the EC and Secretariat on the podium. Conference pictures from the 1950s are notable for the almost complete lack of women amid the smoke-filled rooms of the colleges within which they traditionally took place. By 2015, although there were still a number of conference veterans in attendance, this was generally a younger, more diverse event.<sup>2</sup> For the second time, the conference was chaired by the Union's first female Chair, Kathy Dyson.

Our second observation was that while the composition of Conference (see below, page 109) had changed, in many ways its agenda represented 'Business as Usual'. The more seasoned conference attendees would have soon

<sup>1</sup> This was the year in which the Union began to hold such conferences regularly.

<sup>2</sup> According to the conference report, there were thirty-eight male and eighteen female delegates (MU 2015: xi). The EC had thirteen men and six women (viii) and the three-person Secretariat was all male.

recognised that many of the issues at stake and campaigns under discussion were relatively immutable. It came as little surprise to see matters relating to pay and conditions, copyright, and public-sector support for music – all hardy annuals and major themes in this history – remaining at the top of the Union's agenda in 2015.

As we show below, by its very nature the Union is a campaigning organisation and such campaigns are duly reported to Conference. While some of these are now conducted entirely under the auspices of the MU,<sup>3</sup> others take place in conjunction with other trade unions<sup>4</sup> or as part of broader initiatives by music industries' groups. For example, as part of UK Music – the sector's lobbying group – the Union was successful in getting a High Court ruling against the UK Government over a proposed private copying exception in July 2015,<sup>5</sup> and was also behind one of a number of petitions<sup>6</sup> to protect the British Broadcasting Corporation's (BBC's) music services when they came under review as part of the Corporation's charter renewal process.<sup>7</sup>

Our third observation was that, in line with other contemporary trade union and party political conferences, there was an almost complete lack of dissent. Historically these conferences were often fractious affairs, but in 2015, only a last-minute emergency motion calling on the Union to support the candidacy of Jeremy Corbyn for the Labour Party leadership caused any serious debate. This was defeated, but only after criticism from some delegates of the Executive's decision, taken on the eve of the conference, to back Andy Burnham. This appeared to be based more on pragmatism than ideology. Burnham had been more supportive to the Union in its previous campaigns, particularly when, in his role as Culture Secretary under Gordon Brown's premiership, he had instigated a change in Government policy on the issue of copyright term extension (Burnham 2008).

The Executive's decision to back Burnham as a 'friend of the music industry' rather than Corbyn reflects some of the tensions that have characterised attempts to build organisations that represent musicians' interests. It can also be seen as illustrating in microcosm the considerable change in the Union's orientation – from being largely a workers' organisation towards becoming a music industries' one – that we outline in this history.

What follows traces this development. This book is about the working lives of musicians in the UK since 1893 as viewed via the evolution of an

<sup>3</sup> For example, the Work Not Play campaign, [www.worknotplay.co.uk](http://www.worknotplay.co.uk).

<sup>4</sup> For example, the Lost Arts campaign, [www.lost-arts.org/](http://www.lost-arts.org/).

<sup>5</sup> Details of this and an explanation of the issues can be found at [www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Home/News/2015/Jul/Private-Copying-Exception-FAQ](http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/Home/News/2015/Jul/Private-Copying-Exception-FAQ).

<sup>6</sup> This came under the banner/hash-tag '#LetItBeeb': <https://petition.parliament.uk/petitions/106091>.

<sup>7</sup> The BBC's Royal Charter is granted for a ten-year period and is due to expire in 2016.

organisation that was founded in that year to protect and promote their interests. That organisation was the Amalgamated Musicians' Union (AMU), which became the MU in 1921. The MU has been at the centre of all the major collective agreements covering the UK's musicians for over 120 years. It has negotiated with all the major employers of musicians and has also represented individual musicians who have come into conflict with an almost bewildering array of organisations, and individuals who have been involved in hiring musicians. As the *only* organisation at the centre of all these collective agreements and individual cases, the MU's story is unique. Its history is one of triumph and failure, of good times and bad, but above all of endurance. It is a history that has hitherto been largely neglected, but that needs to be told in order to understand musicians' working lives, the industries they work in, and wider British musical life.

Our aim here is twofold – to use the prism of the MU to provide insight into musicians' working lives and, via this, to provide further understanding of the music – and broader creative – industries. We begin this Introduction with some reflections on the approach, methods, and sources adopted in our research before turning to our underpinning thesis – that musicians are best conceived of as particular sorts of workers seeking remuneration within a complex matrix of industries clustered in and around music. Finally, we look at a number of recurring themes in the Union's history.

### **Approach, methods, and sources**

The book emerges from a research project that was funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic Research Council (ESRC) and that ran between April 2012 and March 2016. At the outset, we billed it as a 'social history' of the Union, but as the work developed we realised that such a designation was somewhat limiting and did not cover the full extent of the history that we were writing. We did, however, use the work of prominent social historians as a starting point, inspired by the importance they attached to trade unions, class, and the study of industry (for example Cole and Postgate 1948; Hobsbawm 1968; Thompson 1963; Webb and Webb 1920). Of equal interest was that their histories of modern British society were constructed 'from the bottom', with the emphasis on those workers whose stories had been marginalised in previous historical accounts that emphasised great men and institutions.

This history of the MU therefore contains a hybrid of approaches and is something of a combination of an institutional history, a history of particular types of workers, and a wider social and cultural history of (popular)

music and its attendant industries during the period of the Union's existence. As this became evident during the course of our research, we felt that it would be impossible to do full justice to story of the MU without also paying close attention to the other organisations with which it was closely connected. In particular, the story of the Union is closely intertwined with those of Phonographic Performance Ltd (PPL) and the BBC.

Realising the previously unrecognised importance of the MU's role in the development of the post-war music industries, we found ourselves faced with many of the same research dilemmas detailed by Sarah Thornton (1990) when attempting to 'reconstruct the popular past'. In writing a history of British dance halls and discothèques, she found her work obfuscated by the presence of abundant histories that were 'heterogeneous, unofficial and informal' (87), of the type found in the press and individual biographies. This was also the case with the MU, which, as we discuss below, appears mainly as a footnote in both informal and academic histories. Moreover, we also encountered issues of bias,<sup>8</sup> and the scant attention and scrutiny the Union enjoyed were perhaps a reflection of the fact that its members were not generally associated with the top end of the music profession, but were rather seen as being jobbing musicians of little interest to historians. We, of course, would beg to differ.

To unpack the importance of the Union, we employed a three-part methodology. The first of these was a review of the existing literature, the second archival work, and the third detailed interviews with a number of key important figures in the Union's story. Each of those came with its own problems – the limited bibliography, the disappearing paper trails within incomplete archives, and the sometimes conflicting and contradictory recollections of interviewees – but when combined, we trust that they have produced a detailed and revealing history of the Union. We will now look at each of these methods in turn.

### **Precedents**

Like any project, this history builds on a range of existent literature and we stand on the shoulders of giants. Our work necessitated drawing on a wide range of sources including work on the Union itself, musicians' working lives, and the labour movement. We wanted to investigate the working lives of musicians in the UK since 1893 via an organisation that was founded in that year to protect and promote their interests.

<sup>8</sup> The Union's own publications were largely uncritical of its activities, whereas at various points in its history, the music press pursued either pro- or anti-Union agendas.

Prior to our research there was comparatively little academic work on the MU's overall history. What existed were articles that examined either particular eras (David-Guillou 2009) or aspects of the Union's work (Cloonan and Brennan 2013) with passing references to it in works on music and politics (e.g. Frith 1978; Street 1986). In sum, existing academic literature on the Union is somewhat scant, especially when comparisons are made to the work that has been done on musicians' unions in the USA (e.g. Anderson 2004; Countryman 1948; Gorman 1983; Leiter 1953; Roberts 2014; Seltzer 1989) and Australia (Arthur 1997, 2003; Dreyfus 2009; Michelson 1997).

Despite being involved in negotiating musicians' working conditions since 1893, the MU has generally been either neglected or completely overlooked in most of the substantial accounts of the UK's music industries (e.g. Jones 2012; Martland 2013; Negus 1992). If music industries' literature has marginalised the Union, things are little better within trade union studies. Major accounts of British trade unionism (e.g. Clegg *et al.* 1964; Flanders 1968; Pelling 1992; Reid 2004; Wrigley 2002) barely mention it. It has fared better in jazz studies (McKay 2005; Nott 2002; Parsonage 2005) and in histories of broadcasting (Baade 2012; Briggs 1979, 1995; Doctor 1999). While both fields limit themselves to particular facets of the Union's work, they provide greater prominence to the MU's role than the trade union histories do.

Outside the academy there are two important accounts originating from within the Union itself.<sup>9</sup> In 1929 its second General Secretary (GS), E. S. Teale, wrote an account covering the early years of the AMU (Teale 1929a, 1929b). This contains interesting detail, but remains largely descriptive and anecdotal. A more recent history was written by Mike Jempson (1993) to commemorate the Union's centenary. This is invaluable to historians, but is inevitably partial and constrained by both scope and its official nature.

The Union's work has also regularly been reported in the pages of music and entertainment trade magazines like *The Stage*, *Era*, and *Music Week*. These have, at various times, detailed aspects of the Union's work, including negotiations with employers or campaigns to improve the working musician's lot. Broadsheet newspapers, notably the *Daily Telegraph*, *Guardian*, and *The Times*, have also periodically reported on aspects of the Union's work. These have generally provided snippets for us to follow up.

Beyond the specificities of the Union's work, there is more work on the music profession as a whole and some accounts of UK musicians' working lives. By far the most important of these for our work is Ehrlich's *The Music*

<sup>9</sup> There is also a brief account on the Union's first sixty years written by Bertram Newton Brooke in 1954, which can be found in Farmer, 67/3.

*Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (1985). This contains several references to the AMU and its early battles with employers as well as outlining the subsequent development of the MU, but has little on the recording era. Nott's *Music for the People* (2002) also provides some insight into the Union's problems in the 1920s and 1930s. Cottrell's *Professional Music-Making in London* (2004) is a useful ethnographic study of orchestral musicians and the challenges they face. Within popular music, Thompson (2008) examines working practices in the 1960s with some recognition of the MU's work, while in accounts such as Finnegan's *The Hidden Musicians* (1989) and Cohen's *Rock Culture in Liverpool* (1991) insights are provided in to the working patterns and aspirations of certain types of musicians.

The working conditions of orchestral players in the UK have also been documented in histories of the major orchestras (e.g. Davies 2012; Kennedy 1960; Kenyon 1981; King-Smith 1995; Morrison 2004; Russell 1945, 1952, 1953). However, once again, these generally offer little more than passing reference to the MU and none subjects it to sustained analysis. Helpfully, former MU activist Basil 'Nick' Tchaikov (2009) has written an autobiography covering his work in orchestras and the Union during a period spanning almost sixty years.

Perhaps the most systematic overview of attempts to organise musicians comes in an unpublished Ph.D. by Abram Loft (1950) that examines attempts by a range of guilds, protective societies, and trade unions across Europe, the UK, and the USA to do so. This is a fascinating account of how musicians have constantly sought to build organisations that represent their interests, often seeking to limit competition by trying to ensure that musical employment is open only to members – and that membership is strictly controlled. Attali (1985) provides a compelling account of how musicians' working lives were transformed by the onset of industrial capitalism, while Kraft (1996) provides an excellent study of US musicians' early encounters with the recording industry and Stahl (2013) offers a similarly impressive account of more recent developments.

There have also been growing numbers of accounts of work within the creative industries. At the forefront of this in the UK has been David Hesmondhalgh (see Hesmondhalgh and Baker 2010, 2011a, 2011b; and Hesmondhalgh and Percival, 2014). This work has highlighted the notoriously perilous state of much employment in the creative industries and lamented the inability of trade unions to remedy matters. Mulder (2009) offers some arguments as to how orchestral musicians might do this, and suggests that the structural position of Broadway musicians leaves them ideally placed to implement a 'communist workplace' (99). Recently Baade *et al.* (2014) have led research into musical labour across the Atlantic. More broadly Heery *et al.* (2004)

have illustrated how trade unions in the creative industries with memberships containing large numbers of freelance workers have become providers of ‘industrial services’ (31) and ‘labour market intermediaries’ (27).

While such accounts have much to offer, the comparative lack of literature specifically on the MU is a major lacuna in a context where, as noted above, it can lay claim to be the *only* organisation to have an involvement in and/or influence on all of the major agreements that have often underpinned musicians’ working lives. This book aims to rescue its history from its current marginalisation and to bring previously neglected materials forward.

The second part of our methodology involved analysing documents held in various archives. Prime amongst these was the Union’s own archive, housed at the University of Stirling. A survey of this content provided the basis for the formation of a chronology of the Union.<sup>10</sup> These materials provided a rich source of data through which to compile a history of the Union and develop an overview of its work. However, they are inevitably partial – minute books can hide as much as they reveal – and are, of their very nature, biased towards the Union’s own viewpoint. In addition, while wide-ranging, the MU Archive is by no means complete. There was thus a need to supplement its materials. One way of doing this was via further archival research, especially among those of musicians’ employers.

The most important of these was the BBC Written Archive Centre (WAC) in Caversham. We have also drawn on a range of other archives for both wider context and details of specific aspects of the Union’s work. These include The National Archives at Kew (TNA), the Modern Records Centre at the University of Warwick (MRC), the Farmer Collection at the University of Glasgow (Farmer), the Jack Hylton Archive at the University of Lancaster, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) Archive based at London Metropolitan University, the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB) archive at the People’s History Museum in Manchester, and the Orchestral Employers’ Association (OEA) Archive at the University of York.

While these are all open to the public, access to three other archives was provided to us by kind permission of their owners. The first of these was PPL<sup>11</sup> minute books covering the periods 1933–36 and 1962–91. The years in between appear to have been lost and the more recent ones were deemed, understandably, to be (commercially) confidential. The second was various minute books held at the offices of UK Theatre/the Society of London Theatre (SOLT) – an ad hoc collection largely covering predecessor organisations’

<sup>10</sup> See [www.muhistory.com](http://www.muhistory.com).

<sup>11</sup> PPL licenses the public use of recordings and collects royalties on behalf of its members for such usage.

activities. The last was the minute books of the OEA's successor organisation, the Association of British Orchestras (ABO). These collections all served to supplement the MU Archive, often offering different perspectives on key events and giving a sense of the underlying atmosphere. Overall the archival work helped to give a fuller picture of the Union and its work than has previously existed. However, it seldom provided details of the lived experience of those either working on behalf of the Union or interacting with it. For this a separate strand of research was necessary.

This entailed a series of interviews with MU activists, officials, and those who had interacted with the Union over the years. Those from the Union included three General Secretaries<sup>12</sup> and a number of other employees, including regional organisers and those officials responsible for particular aspects of the Union's work, such as recording and orchestras. Activists interviewed included current and former members of the EC and Branch Secretaries. For an outside view we interviewed employers, broadcasters, record company employees, DJs, and commentators.<sup>13</sup> All this provided greater depth to our understanding of the Union and its work – something we approached from a particular perspective.

### **Musicians as workers**

Our approach is to treat musicians as workers or, more accurately, as particular sorts of workers seeking paid employment.<sup>14</sup> They may also be creators, performers, celebrities, and stars, but what matters to us is that they are people seeking to do jobs. The term 'musician' incorporates a wide range of people playing a diverse range of instruments (and/or singing) across a wide variety of musical genres. They may be more or less skilled; play solo or in ensembles; compose or not; and be further demarcated by age, class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and race. But what unites those who join the MU is their status as workers seeking employment within music. Our orientation is not an original one, as writers such as Attali (1985), Ehrlich (1985), Kraft (1996), Loft (1950), and Mulder (2009) have all placed emphasis on musicians as people undertaking work. What subsequently becomes important is the sort of work they undertake, the places in which it takes place, and who is funding and controlling such places.

<sup>12</sup> John Morton, Dennis Scard, and John Smith. Various attempts to interview the other surviving General Secretary, Derek Kay, proved unsuccessful.

<sup>13</sup> A full list of interviewees is included in Appendix B.

<sup>14</sup> We acknowledge the importance of amateur music-making and that a clear divide between amateurs and professionals is not always possible, but follow the MU in concentrating on those musicians seeking paid employment.



Here it is possible to demarcate musicians through consideration of their employment patterns. In particular one key determinant is whether a musician has permanent, full-time, salaried employment or not. Following the merger that formed the MU in 1921,<sup>15</sup> the Union has had a membership within which a small minority have such positions, now largely focused in the UK's major orchestras. It was in the predominantly State-subsidised orchestras where the Union came closest to achieving a 'closed shop'<sup>16</sup> before the 1990 Employment Act effectively outlawed such arrangements. However, the total number of MU members employed in orchestras in 2013 UK was around 1,400, with another 1,550 working freelance (Kerr 2014). This was around 10 per cent of the MU's total membership of 30,718.<sup>17</sup> Self-employed and freelance workers form the vast majority of the Union's membership, with a 2012 report for the Union noting that 'only 10% of musicians are full-time, salaried employees. Half of musicians have no regular employment whatsoever. The vast majority of musicians (94%) work freelance for all or part of their income' (DHA Communications 2012: 14).<sup>18</sup>

Outside the orchestras some musicians may have permanent (if not always full-time) employment in places such as theatres, ballet and opera companies, and as music teachers of various sorts. Even musicians with recording contracts are *not* employees as such; rather they are contracted by record companies to provide services and products (such as recordings) in return for payment based on a percentage of sales once the company's investment (which may include advances to the artists) have been recouped.

There are numerous other types of employment involving freelance musicians, such as recording sessions, television and radio appearances, videos, one-off gigs, and concert tours. Here, the Union has negotiated on behalf of freelancers working in various contexts. As we show in [Chapter 9](#), it continues to do so and has had a series of sector-wide collective agreements with major employers of such musicians. However, such agreements affect the daily workings of only a minority of its members.

Meanwhile musicians not permanently employed can be sub-divided into those whose musical jobs are negotiated on a *seasonal* or *time-limited* basis with employers such as orchestras, theatres, record companies, or broadcasters, and those who are *casually* employed on an ad hoc basis, generally as

<sup>15</sup> In 1921 the AMU and the National Orchestral Union of Professional Musicians (NOUPM) merged to form the MU. See [Chapter 3](#).

<sup>16</sup> McCarthy describes a closed shop as 'a situation in which employees come to realise that a particular job is only to be obtained and retained if they become and remain members of one of a specified number of trade unions' (McCarthy 1964: 3).

<sup>17</sup> [www.certoffice.org/CertificationOfficer/media/DocumentLibrary/PDF/154T\\_2013.pdf](http://www.certoffice.org/CertificationOfficer/media/DocumentLibrary/PDF/154T_2013.pdf).

<sup>18</sup> For more see Taylor (2006, 2008).

non-affiliated musicians whose work consists of an accumulation of one-off, short-term engagements with a number of different employers.

Overall our approach is to treat musicians not simply as workers, but as *particular sorts* of workers seeking employment opportunities in industries wherein freelance working – often on very short contracts – is the norm and a wide range of working practices and contractual arrangements exist. What matters here is not so much whether our demarcations are water-tight, but the implications of musicians' varied working practices for the Union. These will become apparent as the book progresses and form a recurring theme,<sup>19</sup> often serving to undermine notions of a singular music profession.

Our emphasis, then, is not on musicians' talents, charisma, or personalities, but on their working practices. For the Union this often focused on their role as performers, as it was perennially concerned with maximising opportunities for performance, exercising as much control as possible over the conditions under which it occurred and seeking suitable amounts of remuneration for performers. An examination of the issues such workers confront reveals a number of overlapping issues that will now be considered.

## Themes

A number of recurring factors can be seen as affecting musicians' working conditions, including technology, the contemporary state of the music profession and its related industries, changing musical tastes, competition, and gender. Such factors offer both generalities – the development of technology affects all music-making – and specificities – its impact may be mediated by legal and governmental contexts. While recurring throughout this book, they merit some introduction here.

Perhaps the most important theme to emerge during our research was that of technology. In interview, when asked what *the* major issue has been in the Union's history, current GS John Smith replied '*the continual* battle with technology' (2014, emphasis Smith).<sup>20</sup> Numerous aspects of this could be examined, but our focus here will be on the effect on musicians as workers. There are at least three important aspects to this. The first is the most positive – technology is liberating. This can be seen in various areas. For example, consider the transformation of popular music that followed the invention of the

<sup>19</sup> We share Batstone's view that three things contribute to workers' power – their ability to disrupt production, the scarcity (or otherwise) of labour, and their political influence (Batstone 1988: 223).

<sup>20</sup> Citations to interviews are given in italics to distinguish them from references to publications. The list of interviews can be found in the Appendix.

electric guitar – perhaps *the* emblematic popular-music instrument (Waksman 2001). Then consider what effects pedals can add to the sheer range of musical possibilities the guitar has. Numerous other examples could be given: the point here is that technology enables these workers to perform all sorts of roles that were previously impossible.

However, there are also down sides to technology, of which two appear to be the most salient – de-skilling and replacement. The issue of de-skilling raises questions about the very status of being a musician. If one definition of musician involves possessing a particular skill set – that of being able to play a musical instrument to a certain standard and under certain conditions (primarily in public with others) – then as technology simplifies the music-making process, so the very status of musician becomes compromised. Once again history provides numerous examples – drum machines, synthesisers, samplers, and a range of modern computer-based technologies. Perhaps the paradigmatic case here is the role of DJs – which has moved from being about playing records, to being producers of music in their own right – something considerably aided by changes in technology. Thus when the Union began to admit them as members in the 1990s (Lee 1997) this was recognition that technology had changed their role and made musicians of those whose trade might previously have been seen as parasitic *upon*, or displacing, musicians.<sup>21</sup>

More problematic for the Union than de-skilling is the total replacement of musicians with technology. Over eighty years after the arrival of ‘talkies’ (films containing sound) in the cinemas in the late 1920s remains the emblematic example of this. It must be remembered here that ‘silent’ cinema was anything but silent and that the major films of the time were frequently accompanied by large orchestras. From the release of *The Jazz Singer* in 1927 the impact of the ‘talkies’ was dramatic and, as we show in [Chapter 3](#), musical employment fell dramatically in ways that haunt the Union to this day.<sup>22</sup> The lesson learned was that simply being oppositional was unlikely to yield results. Tactics thus generally shifted towards attempts to control, combined with trying to maximise employment opportunities for musicians. Thus, while technological developments such as records, radio, television, and internet technology were rarely embraced, the real battle was to protect musical employment – either via the technology itself or via claims to the profits it generated.

<sup>21</sup> Perhaps the most notorious case here concerns former Radio Luxembourg DJ Tony Prince. See [www.dmcworld.tv/historyofdj/](http://www.dmcworld.tv/historyofdj/) for details.

<sup>22</sup> In interviews both the current General Secretary (*Smith 2014*) and its orchestral organiser (*Kerr 2014*) spontaneously referred to the Union’s response to the ‘talkies’ as something that should not be repeated.

The MU's actions in opposing technological innovation have been the subject of criticism. Street has said of the MU's approach to technological innovations that 'while inspired to protect members, the MU's policy appears as merely reactionary' (1986: 147). As will be shown, this entailed a range of tactics. However, it is important to establish that historically the MU has been at least as opportunist as it has been oppositional. While advancing technology remained a constant threat to musical employment,<sup>23</sup> it could be used as well as opposed. Thus, the Union's role became that of ensuring that it was either contained or monetised to the benefit of its members. Seeing all this through the prism of musicians as workers allows for a nuanced view of the MU's actions to emerge. Workers who are being threatened with replacement by new technology do not expect their union to stand idly by and this option was never open to the MU. It therefore strove both to mitigate the impact of new technology and to use it to preserve and create as many opportunities as possible for the employment of live musicians.

It is also necessary to acknowledge that technological innovations do not happen in isolation: they exist in societies with particular sets of social and economic arrangements. In short, for the MU, technological innovations occurred within capitalist economies characterised by varying degrees of competition and State intervention. They also occurred within a particular set of arrangements generally referred to as the 'music industry', another key theme. The book here inevitably bears our intellectual stamp and builds on our previous work and interests in the political economy of music. Of particular importance here is our conception of 'the music industries' (Williamson and Cloonan 2007, 2013).

In referring to 'the music industries' in a plural rather than singular form we made a somewhat polemical attempt to shift academic consensus away from a concentration on the recording sector as *being* 'the music industry' towards a more pluralistic approach. We adopt this approach here and suggest that a consideration of all the places in which musicians work soon shows how problematic a notion of a singular music industry is. The MU has to deal with myriad employment situations and workplaces every day and the complexity of its world is better reflected via such an approach. This has important implications for our emphasis. This is an account of the MU as a music industries' organisation. It is *a* history of the MU – not *the* history.

<sup>23</sup> For example in 2014 the Union was involved in a dispute over a production of *War Horse* at the National Theatre that terminated the contract of five musicians and replaced them with recorded music. See [www.musiciansunion.org.uk/news/2014/04/25/save-the-war-horse-b-and-keep-music-live-in-theatres/](http://www.musiciansunion.org.uk/news/2014/04/25/save-the-war-horse-b-and-keep-music-live-in-theatres/).

We also distinguish between ‘the music profession’ as described by Ehrlich (1985) and our definition of the ‘music industries’. Here we consider the former to comprise those who play music for a living, making them a part of the music industries, which also include those involved in the organisation and exploitation of their work. While accepting that such boundaries are porous, we trust they have some explanatory power. We are interested in musicians as workers, in different workplaces, with differing terms and conditions in constant evolution as musical trends come and go and supply and demand fluctuates – and in the politics that result from all this. This necessitates examining the state of the UK’s music industries at any given point. One noticeable aspect of this is that recorded music has only ever provided significant income for a minority of the Union’s membership. For the majority of its members ‘work’ consists primarily of live performance and, as noted above, the Union has long seen the provision of the opportunities for the employment of live musicians as its main aim. For the MU the longstanding motto of ‘Keep Music Live’ is no mere slogan, it is an underlying philosophy.

The changing complexion of the music industries has complicated matters here as it has shaped the increasingly diverse range of work that musicians undertake. In 1893 the AMU could work locally. It knew which venues employed musicians and would try both to recruit such people and to encourage major employers – such as music halls and theatres – to employ only its members. In essence ‘the music industry’ was then largely a local, live industry. However, the growth of recording and broadcasting, as well as new outlets for live work such as cruise ships and holiday camps, meant that the very notion of what constituted ‘the music industry’ changed and became more complex. Organisations such as the BBC and cinema chains emerged and employed significant numbers of musicians without necessarily being seen as part of ‘the music industry’. While such philosophical questions were not the Union’s concern, it had to deal with the implications for musicians *as workers*.

The Union’s general response was to try to get agreements with major employers and, whenever possible, to ensure that such agreements covered both permanent employees and freelance musicians. Here an examination of the organisations with which the MU has collective agreements at any point in time provides a great deal of insight in to the state of the contemporary music industries. We illustrate how the Union has had to develop a range of relationships with major employers, and to adapt as the music industries have evolved through various entrepreneurial models, changing technology, and fluctuating public and private investment. In particular, as the recording sector rose and was underpinned by the exploitation of copyright, so the Union sought to ensure that performers enjoyed the fruits of such exploitation.

All this meant dealing with the realities of the music industries. Much could be said here, but one area that has been a constant issue for the MU is the question of over-supply of labour – that is, of competition for employment. While there are musicians whose talents seem to be unique, much musical work can also be viewed as routine, if by no means immune to individual input. Here the popular-music market is particularly competitive with the live sector including phenomena such as ‘pay to play’ gigs and a recording sector characterised by few contracts and a ‘success’ rate that rarely appears to have been over 10 per cent (Osborne 2014).

In short, the music industries are highly competitive. They also contain workplaces that are almost impossible to monitor systematically and where musical workers rarely enjoy the one real sanction usually available to workers – collective withdrawal of labour. There has never been an all-out strike of musicians in Britain, and where strikes have taken place they have been confined to particular workplaces over issues specific to that group of workers. The AMU’s early days witnessed strikes in individual theatres, but the increasingly disparate nature of the music industries and the sorts of employment on offer within them meant that such actions became exceptional. When strikes occurred, they tended to be in places where workers were in full-time, permanent contracts – notably at the BBC. The most recent example of this was the 1980 BBC strike, which is dealt with in [Chapter 7](#). Meanwhile freelance workers are inevitably less likely and able to withdraw their labour than those in large, organised workplaces. Lacking industrial muscle within the music industries the MU has often tried to convince employers and potential allies of the morality of its case. When unable to enforce, it has tried to persuade.

In addition, the MU has tried from its inception to limit competition. Initially this concentrated on trying to enforce local closed shops. As the music industries developed, it was also able to enforce de facto closed shops at various points in areas such as broadcasting, theatres, and orchestras, and reached agreements with employers enforcing them.<sup>24</sup> Prior to its illegality, the closed shop allowed for both protection of existing workers and some control over entry into the profession. However, it was only ever one tactic. Another was to try and curtail the activities of those deemed to be in direct competition with its members. Two main groups have been evident here. The first of these is military<sup>25</sup> and police bands. The MU Archive is full of evidence of attempts by the Union to convince the military and police authorities that

<sup>24</sup> For example, a 1983 agreement between the Theatrical Managers’ Association (TMA) and the MU states that ‘a manager shall not engage a musician under this agreement who is not a member of the Musicians’ Union’ (TMA files).

<sup>25</sup> See Countryman (1948) for similar concerns in the USA.

it should not allow public concerts by such bands as these were events that could equally be undertaken by its members.

Another form of competition was also a recurring issue – the importation of foreign musicians. This issue also arose early on with the AMU's first GS, Joe Williams, seeking 'to reduce competition, particularly from European musicians who had almost unrestricted access to work in Britain' (Jempson 1993: 8). During the First World War various local branches passed motions calling for the expulsion of members from enemy countries (and beyond),<sup>26</sup> and the following years saw calls for musicians from former enemy countries to be denied work permits. During the 1920s the growing popularity of American dance bands caused concern that they were performing roles that British musicians could equally do at a time when the American Federation of Musicians (AFM) routinely vetoed attempts by the UK to tour there.

In 1935 the MU's stance got official sanction when the Ministry of Labour agreed to stop issuing further work permits without the Union's approval, which was generally not forthcoming. The system was relaxed in 1956 when a series of reciprocal exchanges began. Based on 'man hours', the system allowed for musicians to be traded across the Atlantic (and elsewhere) and was in force until the late 1980s when the Government stopped routinely consulting the Union on permits. This story has been authoritatively told elsewhere (Cloonan and Brennan 2013) and we return to it below, providing evidence to show that this was merely one example of a number of protectionist measures that the Union was able to implement until well into the 1980s.

A final group of competitors were amateurs, some of whom had the potential to undercut the rates demanded by professional musicians. Examples of disputes around this appear to be comparatively rare and the opposition mainly rhetorical. However, overall it can be seen that the MU has adopted a dual approach of trying to limit competition as far as possible as well as trying to provide as many opportunities as possible for the employment of live musicians.

The final major theme that we examine in [Chapter 9](#) is equalities, and we focus on gender and race relations. The absence of prominent women in the Union's history is a glaring one. While Joe Williams' mother, Kate, has been described as the 'Mother of the Union'<sup>27</sup> it appears that it bore comparatively few activist daughters. The EC and Biennial Conferences were an all-male preserve until after the Second World War, and in the Union's first hundred years

<sup>26</sup> On 11 June 1916 the Glasgow Branch passed a motion 'that no foreigners be admitted to membership of the Union' (MU, 4/2). The context for this was an influx of Belgian refugees to the city and fears that they might take work from local musicians.

<sup>27</sup> In an anonymous obituary in the MU *Monthly Report*, July 1931: 3.

only two women served on the EC. The first, Kay Holmes, served between 1948 and 1951, while the second, Barbara White, was not elected until 1990. Early correspondence in the MU Archive sees fellow members addressed as 'Dear Sir and Bro', and the lack of women within the Union can partly be seen as a reflection of the fact that for many years the music profession and its related industries were male dominated. This is certainly the case with instrumentalists, and while a number of woman singers enjoyed successful careers, most were members of another union, the Variety Artistes' Federation (VAF) which was incorporated into the actors' union Equity in 1967.

Over the years the situation would gradually improve, and by 2013 the Union's membership was 28.6 per cent female (MU 2013a: 6). This was aided in part by broader social changes following the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the impact of the feminist movement. However, overall, this will be a largely male-dominated history. Men have dominated the music industries and the musicians' representative organisation. However, any history is inevitably a process of inclusion and exclusion, and the exclusion of women from most of the Union's activities for much of its history is certainly a significant one.

Matters of race and racial discrimination have featured from the Union's early days, and we consider the accusations of racism levelled against the Union when it fought to protect its members from competition from foreign workers. Its later support for the anti-apartheid movement and opposition to colour bars in British venues provide a counterpoint to such claims and were among the first signs of the Union becoming a more diverse and tolerant organisation after the Second World War.

It should also be noted that the history that follows is often a London-centric one.<sup>28</sup> This is for two main, and overlapping, reasons. The first is that prior to the advent of processes of political devolution that began with the election of the Labour administration in 1997, the modern UK has had a highly centralised State. Laws affecting the lives of musicians emanated from Westminster, which was thus the focus of political lobbying. Relatedly, the music profession has long been centred in and around London, and so many of the major events – such as negotiations with the BBC and the Ministry of Labour – have taken place there. Since 1921 between a third and a half of MU members have been located in London. In addition, while we have generally sought to provide a UK-wide account of the MU, it is important to note that London is a significant city for the international music industries. The Union's membership has been skewed towards the city, and its Central London Branch was for

<sup>28</sup> For one account of the MU at local level see Thomson (1989).



many years the most important (*Morton 2014; Trubridge 2014*). Naturally our history extends to the provinces and we do not doubt that there are many important local histories still to be told. The MU Archive contains one way into this and we fervently hope that future researchers will delve more here. We are conscious that a history such as this inevitably has to play off breadth against depth. So we consider this history a start.

The themes of technology, the state of the music industries, competition, and equalities are, of course, hardly discrete. They overlap and interact, and can be seen as ever-presents that affect musicians as workers and that their representative organisation has tried to mediate for over 120 years. Its longevity, and central role in the history of the UK's music industries, makes the MU unique. However, as the [next chapter](#) shows, its precursor – the AMU – was not the first body to take up the mantle of organising and representing musicians.