

Let there be Night

Musicking after Sunset in Early Modern Europe

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Abstracts



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Scott L. Edwards (Vienna)

 Sonic Disruption: Regulating Music, Migration, and Public Order in Early Modern Vienna

Thursday, 4 September 2025 | 5.15–5.45 pm

This paper explores the contested role of sound, particularly music, noise, and performance, in the regulation of public life in Vienna in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. In a city undergoing dramatic demographic and spatial expansion, imperial and municipal authorities increasingly sought to control the sonic environment, especially during the evening and nighttime hours. Drawing on archival sources, I trace how music in streets, taverns, markets, and informal theatres became a focal point of anxieties around morality, discipline, and urban order.

Particular attention is paid to official efforts to police late-night entertainment, from bans on drums, hunting horns, and trumpets to curfews on dancing and music in both city and suburban districts. Institutions such as the Rumorhauptmann and the Brotherhood of St. Nicholas enforced curfews, arrested violators, and attempted to distinguish between legitimate and illicit sound. The case of street singer Johann Strasser illustrates the fragile status of performers who were subject to competing jurisdictions, shifting policies, and public suspicion.

As the authorities cracked down on itinerant musicians, student singers, and ad hoc performances, they simultaneously fostered the development of formal venues like the Kärntertortheater, designed to centralize musical and theatrical life. Ultimately, this paper argues that the regulation of sound in early modern Vienna was deeply tied to broader concerns about class, control, and the image of the imperial capital as a space of order, reverence, and discipline.

Rita Maria Fabris (Bologna)

 Dance on Stage and in the Ballroom: The Long Italian Nights of the Second Half of the 18th Century

Thursday, 4 September 2025 | 4.00–4.30 pm

The paper aims to outline the network of places, times and forms of the theatrical dance and social dance that played such a large part in the nightlife of Italian cities. Drawing upon archival primary sources from two exemplary cities, Milan and Bologna, in the second half of the 18th century, the aim is to identify the main issues underlying a practice whose interrelationships have received little attention from Italian scholars. First of all, who were the ‘dance composers’ in the theatres who were also involved in the organisation of “feste da ballo”? Which theatres and palaces opened their doors to the Carnival “veglioni,” and more; and finally, what types of “feste da ballo” were held, how they were organised, and what dances and costumes were involved?

Marine Ganofsky (St. Andrews)

KEYNOTE | ***A Little Night Frolic: Nocturnal Enchantments
in the Age of Enlightenment***

Friday, 5 September 2025 | 10.00–11.00 am

New nocturnes for a new century: Mozart's *Eine Kleine Nachtmusik* (1787) and Vivaldi's *La Notte* (1729-30) vividly capture the winds of change sweeping through the nights of 18th-century Europe. These works move beyond the beautiful yet often sombre complines of earlier ages. Light and full of life, they sound as if the fears of Satan's demons, once thought to prey on us in our sleep, no longer haunt the night. Likewise, in visual art, the meditative or ominous nocturnes of the Baroque give way to more playful night scenes by artists such as Baudouin and Hogarth. Across Europe, letters, police reports, diaries, memoirs, and fiction all sing with one voice: something is changing; during the long eighteenth century, night is increasingly reimagined as a space-time for secular pleasures.

My research into French libertine fiction—the erotic literature of the 18th century—first led me to explore the nocturnal world of the period's pleasure-seekers. What emerged from this study was that their lively, sometimes tumultuous, and often voluptuous nights were at once historically new and representative of broader shifts in societal attitudes toward night. Libertine nocturnes indeed epitomise how the experiences and representations of night transformed during the 18th century. The Age of Enlightenment, which vanquished many superstitious nocturnal terrors, was also a period of literal lightning. As streets and homes began to replace natural darkness with artificial light, Vauxhalls, night fairs, concerts, plays, masked balls, vespertine strolls along Parisian boulevards, and lavishly illuminated garden parties flourished across Europe. Night was becoming a new playground for those who could afford to light it up—and stay up.

This paper hopes to show that, far from leading to the disenchantment of the world, the Enlightenment enabled the metamorphosis of night into a source of many enchantments. Armed with new lighting technologies and the light of reason, more men and women could echo the call: *Let there be night!*

Andrea Hofmann (Basel)

☞ ***“Wie wird sichs diese Nacht so überaus wohl schlaffen”:
The Night as a Theme of Female Piety in Early Modern Times***

Thursday, 4 September 2025 | 11.30–12.00 am

In the 17th and 18th centuries, Protestant women had a decisive influence on everyday piety with hymnbooks, prayer books and other devotional writings that they wrote and published themselves. With their texts, women provided suggestions for home devotions for the whole family and for individual meditation. The writings by women provide insights into pious practices of the early modern period, but also into theological concepts.

This paper will discuss the role that the night played within female piety in the early modern period. First of all, specific pious practices in the evening and at night will be examined: How did women end their day and what form did piety take at night? What prayers were said, what songs were sung, were there certain rituals? Secondly, the focus will be on the motif of the night itself: texts from the source corpus will be used to determine which theological themes were associated with the night—among them the finiteness of life and also the intimate love for Christ, which women apparently felt with particular intensity at night—as well as how these found their way into women’s songs and poetry in particular. In so doing, this paper opens up aspects of female nocturnal piety, which was an essential part of early modern life.

David R. M. Irving (Barcelona)

 ***Sounds at Sea in the Dark: Night Music on Ships
of Early Modern Europe***

Thursday, 4 September 2025 | 10.30–11.00 am

Music and sounds aboard the sea-going ships of early-modern Europe had similarities with life on land, but also profound differences. Certain sounds were ceremonial, while others marked time periods such as night watches; music also provided entertainment or solace, or played a part in religious devotion. Social and cultural experiences varied according to the vessel's type and function, but strict forms of discipline were generally imposed for all people aboard. Besides the crews of free, indentured, or enslaved people, ships frequently transported important personages and paying guests. Some carried prisoners or captives and some trafficked slaves. Specialist musicians were often employed to carry out their profession; others who made music were sailors or were passengers of various categories. All individuals on ships had different relationships with organised sound, on a spectrum ranging from pleasure to horrific trauma.

In studies of music in early-modern maritime contexts, scholars including Ian Woodfield and Vanessa Agnew have examined a wide range of sonic and musical practices involved in life on ships and in intercultural contact on shore. Given current research into night-musics on land, the nocturnal dimension of sounds and lights on the watercraft of early-modern Europe invites renewed musicological attention. Night-time performances sometimes included displays of fireworks, intimate ensemble music in cabins, or collective artistic expressions on (or below) deck. Safety on water between dusk and dawn—or during the loss of sunlight in the daytime—involved the sounding of trumpets, whistles, or bells. Lights and sounds were vital elements of survival. Of course, experiences in the dark differed greatly for all on board, depending on a boat's size, disposition, and purpose. This paper, which focuses on sea-going ships from early-modern Europe, surveys and critiques a range of case studies to explore the distinctive place of darkness within the sonic and musical aspects of maritime history.

Tanya Kevorkian (Millersville)

 Secular Nocturnal Music-Making in German Baroque Towns

Friday, 5 September 2025 | 3.45–4.15 pm

A broad array of musicians played secular music after dark in German Baroque towns, and an even broader array of people were present as patrons, dancers, and other listeners. The music ranged from official, extensively planned events to impromptu and even rowdy performances. This paper surveys the occasions and venues for such music. Indoors, wedding banquets and dances were ubiquitous, and guild banquets were common; town musicians, sometimes joined by students, were the main performers at these. Opera was offered periodically in some towns, as were concerts by students and town musicians in coffeehouses and taverns. Outdoors, University and gymnasium students sometimes honored visiting rulers or academic dignitaries with specially commissioned works. Less formally, town musicians, students and other musicians were available to accompany wedding guests and fellow students as they strolled home from celebrations. They might also serenade individuals, often young women, in front of their homes. In Catholic towns, the Mardi Gras season was a time of abundant musical merrymaking.

Stephan Klarer (Zurich)

 “septies in die laudem dixi tibi”: The (Musical) Rhythm of Day and Night in Early Modern Benedictine Monasteries

Thursday, 4 September 2025 | 2.15–2.45 pm

Even in the early modern period, the daily Office – comprising the canonical Hours and the nocturnal Vigil – remained the spiritual and temporal backbone of Benedictine monastic life. This paper examines the liturgical and musical structure of the Hours from the sixteenth to the early twentieth century, exploring continuities and transformations within the dynamic tension between tradition and reform.

At the centre stands Gregorian chant as the sonic foundation of the monastic Office. Its practice was maintained in many monasteries even in the wake of Tridentine standardisation – in part with the preservation of regional features such as the Alemannic dialect of chant. On major feast days, the otherwise monodic Office was occasionally expanded with polyphonic settings, though the unison tradition remained dominant. The analysis of selected liturgical manuscripts and monastic regulations provides insights into concrete musical practices as well as the temporal anchoring of prayer throughout the day.

This rhythm followed a largely stable structure: following Vigil and Lauds in the early morning, Prime, Terce, Sext, and None were distributed across the course of the day, with Vespers and Compline concluding the cycle in the evening. This temporal order reflected not only monastic discipline, but also a deeply rooted conception of time as a spiritually and musically shaped framework.

Judith LeBlanc (Rouen/Versailles)

 “Tristes lieux, dépouillez votre horreur ténébreuse”: Nocturnal Dramaturgies and the Aesthetics of Effect in Rameau’s Operas

Friday, 5 September 2025 | 11.30–12.00 am

Although the allegory of Night, a recurrent theme in court ballet, tends to be rare on the Opéra stage, scenes of darkness and night scenes were frequent at the Académie royale de musique. Variations in light intensity were an integral part of the poetics of the marvellous in opera, which called for “tableaux variés” (‘varied tableaux’) (Marmontel) and sought out contrasts.

In this paper, I propose to approach the night scenes in Jean-Philippe Rameau’s works from three angles: dramaturgy, scenography and music. Darkness is exploited by Rameau and his librettists for dramatic and spectacular purposes, which will need to be brought to light. The aim is also to show the need to cross-reference several sources (librettos, production scores, parodies, treatises) in order to get as close as possible to the material conditions of these darkening effects, their meaning and their reception by the public.

Jan-Friedrich Missfelder (Basel)

 Scandalous Serenading: Rowdy Songs on Early Modern Nocturnal Streets

Friday, 5 September 2025 | 4.45–5.15 pm

In this paper, I will deal with nocturnal musicking in early 16th century Zurich in the context of the process of establishing the Reformation. Supporters and opponents of the new religion used defamatory songs and derogatory sounds to voice their opinions about the social and spiritual changes the city underwent in the period between the 1520s and 1540s. By targeting protagonists of the Reformation in particular and by employing a carefully chosen repertoire of rowdy songs, nocturnal serenaders contributed to the every-day struggle over the implementation of a new faith in an urban society.

Margret Scharrer (Bern)

 Musical Night Work: Staging a Topos

Friday, 5 September 2025 | 5.15–5.45 pm

Whether in the form of dancing allegories of dreams, *leçons de ténèbres*, or nocturnes, the night and the behaviors associated with it served as a source of inspiration for composers throughout the early modern period, prompting the creation of a diverse array of works. Yet it was not only through such distinctive artistic productions that the nocturnal found expression. The night also functioned as a significant temporal space for composition itself, with many composers turning to its quiet hours for creative labor.

This can be seen in accounts such as the so-called moonlight anecdote, which we know from the *Nekrolog* on Johann Sebastian Bach. It reports how Johann Sebastian, at night in the house of his older brother Johann Christoph in Ohrdruf, secretly copied “a book full of clavier pieces by the most famous masters of the time” (“Ein Buch voll Clavierstücke von den damaligen berühmtesten Meistern [...]”) that his brother had refused to give him. Unfortunately, Johann Sebastian was unable to keep his copied book secret, for his brother discovered it and took it away from him. Bach only recovered his manuscript after Johann Christoph’s death. Similar stories appear in other biographies. These include Georg Philipp Telemann, who was well acquainted with Bach, and who wrote about his youth in a biographical letter sent to Johann Mattheson in Hamburg in 1718, “[...] that I spent many a night / because I was not allowed during the day / with pen in hand / and many an hour in a lonely place / with borrowed instruments” (“[...] daß ich manche Nacht / weil ich am Tage nicht dürffte / mit der Feder in der Hand / und manche Stunde an einem einsamen Orte / mit geborgten Instrumenten / zubrachte”).

Practising music during the night hours was not only a forbidden activity, but also the staging of creative work. In the 16th and 17th centuries too, this topos, which can even be traced back to antiquity, was cultivated by composers such as Claudio Monteverdi, Ludwig Senfl and Ferdinando di Lasso. This paper will examine this topos in more detail, notably by investigating it in biographies and in the prefaces and dedications of printed music before then providing an analysis of the results.