

Conference on Politics in Music and Song (Queen's University Belfast, 8-10 September 2023)

Abstract for Keynote

Our Subversive Voice: Protest songs as history, protest songs as politics

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We report on the results of the AHRC-funded project Our Subversive Voice (OSV). OSV had two main tasks. The first was to highlight and trace the long history of the English protest song, and the second was to understand the protest song as a form of political communication and engagement. Both the story and the role of the English protest song, we argue, deserve to be heard.

In our talk, we consider the protest song in the *longue durée*, arguing for the usefulness of the anachronism 'protest song' as far back as the early modern period. At least since Martin Luther nailed up his articles, the histories of song, print, and the act of political process have been inextricably linked, and we suggest that considering some historical sung interventions into the political arena as protest songs is both justifiable and rewarding. Thinking across five centuries of such songs, we discover a history of both English politics and of song that is at once familiar and strange: from the themes that have always been sung to those that have been sung crescendo or diminuendo in different eras; from the commercial solo song to the communal voice of unpaid activists – and back again.

We suggest that the protest song does more than mark social and political change or simple re-iterate political views. Rather, we contend that it acts as a form of speech, organisation and representation, shaping political thought and making possible forms of political activism, and that this is as true today as it was in the seventeenth century.