

“Why these are the city waits, who play every winter’s night through the streets to rouse each lazy drone to family duty. These are the topping tooters of the town, and have gowns, silver chains, and salaries, for playing ‘Lilliburlero’ to my Lord Mayor’s horse through the city.”

Ned Ward, *The London Spy*, 1709

London in the late 16th century had reached its peak as a centre of trade, commerce, court, and government. A cosmopolitan populace and a multitude of pleasures, virtuous or otherwise, were to be found within and without the crumbling city walls. The City of London had, by the late 1500s, rapidly outgrown the walled square mile and spilled over into the smaller villages and towns in all points of the compass, engulfing the leafy hamlets of Whitechapel, Hackney, Westbourne, and across the river into the infamous “suburbs of sin” in Southwark. Where once stood secluded monastic buildings and grand stately homes now were hastily built tenements of multiple occupancy housing, with dividing alleys so narrow one could reach across and shake hands with the person opposite. And the place stank: No proper sanitation meant rubbish and human and animal excreta piled up at street ends and the rudimentary drainage channels running through the middle of thoroughfares were clogged and overflowing. Residents would empty the brimful Jordan (chamber pot) directly into the public pathway. Long before the Great Plague of the 1660s London was subjected time and time again to visitations of epidemic disease and plague, which each time resulted in the temporary closure of all public places, including theatres.

There was splendour and spectacle too. London had become the centre of the court and the royal palaces of Whitehall, St James, and Westminster were sites revered by foreign and native visitors alike. The New Exchange, the Elizabethan stock exchange, was such a sight that rural visitors to the city had their breath snatched away by its splendour; London Bridge creaked and groaned under the weight of generations of rebuilding, festooned at the Southwark end with the heads of criminals and traitors mouldering on long pikes for all to see. The mighty Thames, wider by some hundred feet than today, carried great volumes of traffic to the many wharfs and docks to deliver goods from around the world to an increasingly demanding clientele. Pay your penny to the boatman and you crossed the river to experience the world of theatre, bear baiting, and the “stews.” Here were located the two famous theatres of early 17th-century London, the Rose and Shakespeare’s Globe. The two competed for audiences with all the other available attractions as well as other theatres across the river, The Curtain Theatre, and the covered hall that was Burbage’s Blackfriars Playhouse.

Central to the musical life of the city were the “Waits,” a professional band of musicians who were expected to play for civic and ceremonial occasions. They received an annual wage and were granted livery, raising their status above that of the common minstrel so derided and mistrusted by the city authorities.

Waits in London were considered some of the best in the land, rivalled only perhaps by those of Norwich. These musicians were primarily players of wind instruments, the shawm, curtal, cornett, and sackbut, and these would have been a common sight and sound on the streets and in the halls and churches of the parishes of London. As Anthony Baines puts it:

“Of all musical sounds that from day to day smote the ears of a sixteenth-century town resident, the deafening skirl of the shawm band in palace courtyard or market square must have been the most familiar.”

As well as their civic duties, waits were free to solicit employment in other aspects of city life. The ever-popular theatres that had sprung up in and around the city in the latter 1500s could provide regular work for the wait. Stage directions in the plays of Shakespeare and his contemporaries call for “hoboys,” “recorders,” “cornetts,” and “shawms” as well as providing cues for songs and dances. Waits were versatile and could play several instruments, including strings and soft wind. These talents were useful in the theatre, and when Thomas Morley dedicated his *First Booke of Consort Lessons* (1599) to the London Waits, he praised their highly skilled playing and declared “my love towards them.”

This band would have been responsible for much of the music played at the sophisticated venue of the Blackfriars theatre in London. The theatre was the size of a small hall (it had belonged the Blackfriars monastery before the dissolution) and was covered, unlike most theatres such as the Globe and the Rose. Therefore it could operate in the winter months, and as part of a move towards more sophisticated performances for the educated elite, the admission charges were considerably higher than elsewhere. It was here that the lawyer Bulstrode Whitelocke recalled visiting to cultivate the favour of the waits who played there, even persuading Simon Ives to arrange and harmonise a "coranto" he had composed. *Mr Whitlock's Coranto* is that very piece, one of the few that can definitely be linked to the wait repertoire.

Waits would also have been hired to play for the many dances, plays and masques that were organised by the Gentlemen of the Inns of Court. Ostensibly there to provide a legal training for students, the various "Inns of Court" in London provided a finishing school for young men and was to all intents and purposes the de facto university of London. Grays Inn, The Temple, and Lincolns Inn were the major Inns, and it fell to them to provide musical entertainments for themselves and the gentry of London. The city waits would have been the obvious choice as providers of music, unless musicians from court were brought in instead. The sequences of masque tunes by the waits, John Adson, Simon Ives, and the anonymous "Old Measures" would have been the typical musical fare at the frequent "maskings" and "disguises" presented at the Inns.

Waits also played a part in parochial life of the city. In some cities and towns waits were required to fulfil ancillary duties by undertaking the role of night watchmen. As responsible members of their parish and perhaps even of their local guild or fraternity they would contribute towards the musical life of their local church. The second part of the concerts begins with a sequence of psalms as might well have been sung and played by waits for services and in the time of religious holidays and pageants.

The city musicians were in fact highly regarded and much in demand. They were able to regulate their profession, thus maintaining a high standard and reputation. Their work encompassed major civic events, theatre, dance hall, church, and, from 1571, a regular public performance on Sundays at the Royal Exchange, constituting perhaps the first public concerts in England.

❖ William Lyons 2009