musical activities presented here or the personalities who helped to create them are indeed unique. But equally I feel certain from the informal evidence discussed later, from the existing foundations in the area, and from the very mix of people from different origins in Milton Keynes, that many of the broad patterns described in later chapters are to be found fairly widely in England—an invisible system structuring and maintaining local music up and down the country.

2

Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

This part gives some account of the differing musics in Milton Keynes in the early 1980s. It is difficult to know how to present the inevitably overlapping and heterogeneous material of so complex a study as that of the musical activities of a whole town. I finally decided to begin with a plain description of the main ‘musical worlds’ into which local music-making seemed broadly to be divided (in part 2) and then (in part 3) consider some of the contrasts and comparisons between them before going on to the further analysis in parts 4 and 5.

The idea of a musical ‘world’ partly arises from local participants’ own descriptions. Brass band involvement was ‘a world on its own’, and classical art music seen as ‘quite different world’ from that of rock music. The term has also been used by anthropologists and others to refer to people’s ‘world view’ or to different ‘social worlds’, emphasising the differing and complex cultures of ideas and practice within which people variously live.’

This has been taken further in Howard Becker’s illuminating study of ‘art worlds’ (1982). Since the concept of musical ‘worlds’ has structured my presentation in this part, it is worth quoting Becker’s exposition:

Art worlds consist of all the people whose activities are necessary to the production of the characteristic works which that world, and perhaps others as well, define as art. Members of art worlds coordinate the activities by which work is produced by referring to a body of conventional understandings embodied in common practice and in frequently used artifacts...

The interaction of all the involved parties produces a shared sense of the worth of what they collectively produce. Their mutual appreciation of the conventions they share, and the support they mutually afford one another, convince them that what they are doing is worth doing. If they act under the definition of “art”, their interaction convinces them that what they produce are valid works of art. (Becker 1982, pp. 14, 39)

The ‘musical worlds’ of Milton Keynes were instances of such ‘art worlds’. They were distinguishable not just by their differing musical
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

styles but also by other social conventions: in the people who took part, their values, their shared understandings and practices, modes of production and distribution, and the social organisation of their collective musical activities.

Part 2 therefore presents in turn some description of the various musical worlds of classical, brass band, folk, musical theatre, jazz, country and western, and rock or pop music which could with varying degrees of distinctiveness be found in Milton Keynes. Each is treated here as valid in itself, presented at least in part from the viewpoint of its participants. This approach is necessary for understanding the conventions in these differing worlds in their own terms, but it is also one that, surprisingly, cannot be taken for granted. ‘Music’ tends to be at once a word of approval and one that means different things to different people; what one group unambiguously define as ‘music’ may be rejected by others as not ‘really’ music, or as ‘mere noise’ or ‘childish’ or ‘just a boring series of notes’. It thus takes some detachment as well as self-education to envisage music right across the spectrum from ‘pop’ to ‘classical’ as equally valid, for this means refusing to accept any one set of assumptions about the ‘true’ nature of music and instead exploring each ‘world’ as of equal authenticity with others.

4

The classical music world at the local level

Classical or ‘serious’ music is what many readers will first think of when music is mentioned. For its participants this is the world of music, the type of music which in its repertoire, teachers, and performance is music par excellence, validated through state and church patronage and by its acceptance as part of the artistic heritage of European Christian civilisation. As one of the central cultural traditions of our society perhaps it seems too familiar to need explication. But one aspect that is often overlooked is the role of the amateur musicians and their local activities. This chapter describes some of the local practices and practitioners within classical music, the way these relate to the wider classical model, and the essential contribution they make to the continuance of classical music as a performed art form.

The local activities and groups within this classical music world took various forms. There were the occasional visits of famous professional orchestras and soloists to give performances in one or other of the local halls, and concerts by local orchestras and choirs with visiting professional soloists. Local pupils from time to time went on to professional music training at one of the specialist music colleges outside the area after initial instruction by local teachers. But these more spectacular events were only part of the picture, for there were also the ‘lesser’ local activities that on a day-to-day basis both reflected the ideal classical model and, ultimately, enabled its realisation in practice.

School music was one important element. In addition to formal music lessons, children’s ensembles played regularly outside lessons, and schools put on concerts for parents and friends (described further in chapter 15). The Buckinghamshire Education Authority also ran two music centres (one in Bletchley — the North Bucks Music Centre — and one at the Stantonbury Education Campus) which organized peripatetic instrumental teachers for local schools and ‘Junior Music Schools’ on Saturday mornings where local children played in groups or gave regular termly concerts (see figure 8). Like
The classical music world at the local level

especially to children, was a flourishing industry with pupils of varying levels of proficiency playing musical instruments not only to their teachers but also at school or church, in local groups and in the home.

The churches were another context for the local enactment of classical music. Many had their own choirs, together with one or more organists who played from the recognised classical repertoire on church occasions, including the life-cycle ceremonies so often held in church – christenings, weddings, funerals. It was thus through the churches as much as through formal concert halls that many people came to appreciate the large proportion of the classical musical heritage that is so closely associated with the Christian tradition, and themselves actively participated in it (see further in chapter 16).

A further essential part in the local enactment of classical music was played by the local groups formed to promote or perform music. The extent and scope of these active musical groupings, and the systematic conventions by which they organised their music, may well surprise those who bemoan the disappearance of active music-making today, or the ‘cultural desert’ in our cities. Let me illustrate this by some description of the local orchestras, instrumental ensembles, and choirs.

First, the orchestras. The best known was the Milton Keynes Chamber Orchestra, founded ‘to provide a regular series of high quality professional concerts in the new city’ as part of MKDC’s strategy for making the city a centre for artistic excellence. As described in chapter 2, this soon became recognised as a professional orchestra, with national as well as regional connections, and many of its players lived outside Milton Keynes. As such it does not really come within the scope of this study, but did have some relevance in that its regular local rehearsals and performances provided one model for younger instrumentalists as well as a focus for local audiences keen on hearing professional playing.

Among the other orchestras the highest in the classical hierarchy was the Sherwood Sinfonia (figure 9). This was founded in 1973 as a high-standard amateur orchestra for the area and by the 1980s was playing regularly under a professional conductor. Local music teachers made up a substantial proportion of its members and recruited their advanced pupils from local schools, supplemented by other experienced players from the area, playing the typical classical orchestral instruments: strings (violins, violas, cellos, double bass), woodwind (flutes, oboes, clarinets, bassoons, trumpets, horns, trombone and tuba) and percussion – about 55 players in all. Membership was restricted to those with the appropriately high-level qualifications, the accepted criteria being high grades reached in the nationally recognised examinations, personal recommendation by an existing member (especially the music teachers) or in some cases audition. In keeping with the classical music tradition, the orchestra had enlisted a nationally known and highly
reckoned lower in both expertise and aspirations. There were the Newport Pagnell Concert Orchestra (founded in 1980) and the older Wolverton Light Orchestra, both expecting to recruit players who were of reasonably high standard (the national Grade VII examination was mentioned as desirable for the former, for example) but were perhaps not experienced enough for the Sherwood Sinfonia or just preferred a different kind of musical expression and atmosphere. Some individuals played in more than one orchestra, often choosing to go to the Wolverton Light Orchestra with their second instrument 'for fun'. These orchestras had the same general range of instruments but were smaller and more locally orientated than the Sherwood Sinfonia. They relied on local soloists and conductors rather than professionals from outside, and appeared at smaller local venues like churches and community centres, often with a special emphasis on raising money for local charities. But they too were definitely part of the classical music world, playing with no small degree of lengthily acquired proficiency on classical instruments. It was through them, and those like them, that this classical tradition was in practice maintained at the grass roots, part of the long-flourishing continuity of British amateur music-making.

There were also other more fluid instrumental groups. Some were initially scratch groups who had joined up for some festive occasion or to accompany a local choral performance, like the North Bucks Music Centre Orchestra (accompanying the Sherwood Choir), the Simon Halsey Orchestra (with the Milton Keynes Chorale), or smaller ensembles like the Wavendon Festival Strings, Walton Festival Strings or Cavatina Strings. There were also 25-30 school orchestras, together with three or four 'Saturday music school' orchestras in each of the two music centres, with their gradually changing membership as children worked through the various grades.

Each of these musical groups - which may sound uninteresting in a bare list - was made up of active and cooperating individuals. Each involved an immense amount of commitment and skill, and the co-ordination of quite large numbers of people (even the Saturday junior orchestras could contain 30 or 40 children/teenagers). All depended on voluntary participation by the players, time that could equally well have been spent on other activities.

There were also smaller classical instrumental groups, though their numbers and importance seemed to be nowhere near those of the more 'popular' bands discussed in later chapters. Classical groups did not have the same recognised public outlets as rock, jazz or folk groups, they tended to play in private - thus unknown to others - and perhaps instrumentalists in the classical tradition found individual or orchestral playing more satisfying than chamber groups. However, there were some small groups, not all long-lasting. These included the Bernwood Trio, the Milton Keynes Baroque Ensemble, the Syrinx Wind Quartet, the Syrinx Wind Octet, the Baroque

qualified musician as their President, his name printed in its full glory on the orchestra's letterhead: Sir Thomas Armstrong, MA, D. Mus. (Oxon.), Hon. FRAM, Hon. FRCO, Hon. FTCL.

The Sherwood Sinfonia were a serious and committed orchestra which took justifiable pride in their high standards, and at the same time remained very local in their playing, membership, audiences, rehearsals and performances. They gave about four concerts a year in local halls, mostly playing works from the accepted classical repertoire by composers like Mozart, Dvořák and Brahms, though for their light-hearted Christmas family concert, they chose lighter pieces together with joke items, quizzes, or audience-sung carols. As with most groups of this kind, they moved through a repeated annual cycle: the weekly rehearsals were climaxed by the intensive activity leading up to the regular concerts, each preceded by its three-hour afternoon rehearsal and culminating in the evening performance in front of an audience largely made up of friends and relations. In the early 1970s the Sherwood Sinfonia was described as 'the classical musical activity in the town', and even ten years later, despite the founding of the Milton Keynes Chamber Orchestra, it had not wholly lost this position.

When orchestras and ensembles were graded in typical classical fashion by their playing and performing standards, other orchestral groups were
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

Brass Ensemble, the Sceloe Brass Ensemble and — in slightly different vein — the Milton Keynes Society of Recorder Players, who played monthly in Walton Church. Most of these were amateur (though some were mixed or ‘semi-professional’, i.e. with local music teachers) and, being small, had no need for the formal conductor expected in the larger groups. In addition there were fluid private arrangements by which people met in each other’s houses — preferably one with a piano — to sing or play together.

To many English readers, the existence of these orchestral and instrumental groups may in a way seem scarcely worth remark — a natural part of local classical music and of English urban life. But this active instrumental activity at the grass roots is not found everywhere. It has sometimes been claimed that the success of English players in European youth orchestras is due to the distinctive English development of local—(not just national)—level playing, with school, youth and adult amateur orchestras in just about every English town. The orchestral and other instrumental groups in Milton Keynes both followed out this taken-for-granted pattern and played an active part in its continuance.

The local choirs made up the other main strand in the classical music world, a natural outgrowth of the strong choral tradition in the area. Besides the many church and school choirs there were also independent choirs, each with their own conductor or musical director (usually male and with formal classical training), which often contained at least a scattering of music teachers and of experienced choral singers. The leading choirs in this mould were the Milton Keynes Chorale and Danesborough Chorus (each with about 80-plus members, and often appearing on large city occasions like the prestigious February Festival) and the smaller Sherwood Choral Society (30–40 members; see figure 29 and further discussion in chapter 18). Some continued the tradition of the older locally based choral societies, like the Newport Pagnell Singers, with their roots in the Wolverton Choral Society, dating back to early in the century; the Stratford Singers at Stony Stratford (see figure 20), ‘one of the most popular choirs in Milton Keynes’, according to the local newspaper, formed in 1974 ‘to sing together for our pleasure and that of the audience’; and, until it ended in 1980, the Bletchley Ladies Choir, dating from the 1940s.

Most larger choirs were (like the orchestras) based on the accepted British ‘voluntary association’ model, with written constitution, elected officers and committee, formalised membership subscriptions and accounts, and Annual General Meeting. They normally rehearsed one evening a week throughout the year with a break in the summer, meeting in one or other of the local halls or in village, school or community meeting-places. They had broadly similar yearly cycles. A Christmas concert was usually one high point — so much so that a city-wide committee tried (not altogether successfully) to arbitrate between choirs’ claims for the same Saturday evening.

The classical music world at the local level

December. There was also often a major concert in the spring or summer, with occasional smaller performances at other times in the year.

Each was worked for according to an accepted routine of rehearsals and performance. It started with detailed practising of isolated parts of the works under the conductor (and perhaps his or her assistant), singing to piano accompaniment, then moved gradually towards consolidating the piece as a whole, culminating in the intensity of the later rehearsals when the work began to ‘come together’, then the great but sometimes traumatic rehearsal on the afternoon of the concert (often a revelation to the choir as for the first time they heard the whole work complete with solos and full accompaniment). Last came the experience of the full evening performance before an audience.

This cycle of rehearsal—performance was a recurrent one, especially when, as commonly with the large choirs, the music came from the renowned classical repertoire of oratorio and church music. These were mostly four-part works, ideally with orchestral accompaniment and visiting soloists, by such composers as Handel (Messiah) was still one of the great popular pieces, the music known to most singers), together with Haydn, Mendelssohn, Brahms, Bach, Vivaldi, Fauré, and others in the recognised classical canon whose works were over the years sung alternately by the various local choirs. These formed the core of the expected choral repertoire, but there were also concerts of more modern works, especially English compositions by, say, Vaughan Williams or Britten, ‘light classics’ by Bizet or Sullivan, and arrangements of both popular and esoteric carols. Many choir members were already acquainted with much of the classical repertoire (some had been choral singers for 30, 40 or even 50 years). At the least, they had long-practised skills in sight-reading from written music (an essential requirement for every choir) and in recognising familiar cadences and styles. The classical ideal in terms of repertoire, highly graded direction, and aspirations to a ‘high-standard’ performance was very much to the fore, expressed through the actual singers on the ground who had gained their expertise through a process of informal learning and practising in the amateur tradition.

The same general patterns were also followed by the many smaller choirs like the Orphane Singers, Fellowship Choir, Guild Singers, Canzonetta Singers, Miscellany, St Martin Singers, Woburn Sands Band Madrigal Group and the all-female Erin Singers. Many of these continued over the years, but there were also shorter-lived groups like the New City Choral Society, the Bletchley Further Education College Choir and some who appeared under fluctuating names (the Senior Citizens’ Choir developing into the Melody Group, for example). There were also temporary groups who sang together just for a particular occasion, whether large, like the 180-strong Festival Choir (the joint Danesborough Chorus and Milton Keynes
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

Chorale) at the 1982 Milton Keynes February Festival, or small, like the Village Maidens from the local Women's Institute, who sang after a Christmas pantomime at Stoke Hammond School, and, finally, the various madrigal groups that formed from time to time. Many smaller choirs put on several small events during the year rather than working up one or two main works on the model of the rehearsal—performance cycles of the larger choirs, and sang frequently at churches, fêtes or clubs to raise money for some local good cause or provide entertainment at hospitals or old people's homes. But here there was still a stress on rehearsing to reach as high a standard as possible, almost always with a piano accompaniment and under the direction of a conductor. The different categories shaded into each other, of course, and some small choirs had highly qualified conductors or practitioners in classical music terms (the Open University Choir, for example, or the Tadige Singers), but in general the smaller choirs laid less emphasis on specialist classical training and (unlike the larger, more ambitious choirs) quite often had female conductors.

The number of choirs in the area was thus great. There were perhaps 100 in all, with membership ranging from 90 or so down to around 12–15 (a not uncommon number for the smaller groups), or as few as 5 or 6 in some church choirs. The total number of choral singers in the area was thus probably well over 1,000, though it is hard to calculate exact numbers because of the amount of multiple membership — another notable feature of the choral tradition.

These many choirs and instrumental groups practised through the year without always being especially noticeable except to those most directly involved. However, there were points in the year when their performances became more prominent. At Christmas practically every choir and orchestra gave performances, and there were also great many concerts towards the end of the summer term in the school year. Easter too had its performances, together with other key festivals in the Christian year (especially, but not only, by the church groups). Another high point was February. The annual 'February Festival', initially promoted by the Mkdc Arts division, included both nationally and internationally known professional artists from outside the area, and a few of the leading local groups.

February was also the month of the Milton Keynes (earlier Bletchley) Festival of Arts, a more modest and locally generated event, which followed the established music festival tradition of competitive classes in music, dance and speech for both children and adults in a wide range of ages and standards, judged by visiting adjudicators. It included classes for solo singers and performers on just about every classical instrument, band, recorder groups, small ensembles, and church choirs. The largest choirs and orchestras did not enter, but the festival still provided a showcase of the classical music world in Milton Keynes. Over the days of the festival, many hundreds of entrants came forward and performed in two Bletchley halls, from piano classes for tiny tots to 'recital classes' by young aspirants for music college entrance. The festival had grown from one day in 1968 to an event of more than a week and over 3,000 entrants (almost 80 per cent of them local) by the mid-1980s.

But a mere catalogue gives no real taste of what these many musical activities meant to the participants. This was something over and above the time and work they put into them or the incidental results (sociability or friendship or status) that certainly also often flowed from them. The rewards for those committed to the classical music world are hard to capture in precise words, but they certainly included a sense of beauty and fundamental value, of intense and profoundly felt artistic experience which could reach to the depths of one's nature. For participants in this world there was perhaps nothing to equal the experience of engaging in a beautiful and co-ordinated performance of some favoured classical work, whether in practice or in public concert: the expectant thrill of players or singers entering a hall in their special dress ready for performance, the familiar and evocative sounds of tuning up in front of the audience, the hushed moment as the performers gathered themselves to start or the conductor called all eyes by lifting his baton, and the split second of silence (more of symbolic quality than measured time) at the end before performers and audience returned alike to the everyday world. For those steeped in the classical tradition these richly symbolic moments were experienced as somehow implicating the deep core of people's being.

This experience was not, ultimately, dependent on the super-high professional standards insisted on in the elite national music world. It was something within the compass and imagination of the quite ordinary part-time musicians in the local halls and schools and churches.

These locally practising musicians were of course influenced by many things, social as well as musical, and it would not do to give either too purist or too generalized a picture of what drew each to his or her musical engagements or the views each held of these. One aspect, however, which to some degree or other set them within an overall common background was the general evaluation of the place of classical music in our culture and the model most people had of this. These shared assumptions were usually implicit only, but some brief (if simplified) comments on this model of classical music are relevant for understanding the local scene, even though to many readers they may seem too obvious and "natural" to need stating.

The musical organisation, artistic forms, and personnel associated with classical music in the broad sense of that term were widely, if rather vaguely, assumed to be bound up with many privileged institutions and values of our society: the educational system, church and state functions, and the generally accorded status of a 'high art'. This status was further
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

supported by the existence of specialised musicians who had managed to establish themselves as a recognised profession with control over recruitment and evaluation. The performances and high-level teaching provided by these experts formed the most visible element in what was accepted as the classical music world. The model of classical music in English society was explicitly defined by the specialists in terms both of the kind of music played—most typically performed in a formal public concert—and its historical and theoretical basis.

There were many detailed differences within this overall world, not least the changing historical styles as analysed in advanced musical studies, but in general terms the current idea of the European classical music tradition, as distinct both from non-European music and from 'popular' forms, centred around transmitting the works of influential musicians from the past—the 'great composers'. Musical genres have of course varied at different historical periods, but those commonly cultivated in local (as in national) performances included orchestral symphonies, suites and concerto, instrumental sonatas, oratorios and classical operas, and vocal music of various kinds, usually with instrumental accompaniment and with the underlying idea that their central essence could be and was represented in written scores. There were also classical compositions for particular instrumental combinations from recorder groups to string quartets and instrumental duets, following accepted conventions about both the instruments (specific types of strings, wind and keyboard together with the voice and to some extent percussion), and about how they should be played.

In practice what was classified as within this classical tradition depended not so much on an objective set of criteria as on cultural conventions about the appropriate forms and contexts of music—ones which those outside this world regarded as uninspiring but which classical musicians could justify both in terms of particular patterns of melody, harmony and thematic structures and by the accepted classifications by music specialists, further authorised by the strongly held image of this music as an artistic heritage coming down in written form from the past. Just what was included changed from time to time, and the whole concept of classical music was certainly fuzzy at the edges; what was clear was that it was based not just on musicological content but on definitions and validations by particular groups of people.

This socially defined canon of classical music was what present-day musicians largely worked with. A few themselves composed, but in general their central responsibility was the perpetuation of this heritage, teaching others the skills to appreciate it or to realise it in their own playing. They thus transmitted the musical works written by earlier composers and did so in a context in which this was considered a high, indeed revered, form of artistic expression supported by widely accepted values about high art and

The classical music world at the local level

(in some cases) direct state patronage. Concerts by nationally and internationally known soloists and orchestras and by varying combinations of professional players, both live and broadcast, epitomised what most people envisaged as the classical music tradition of this country, backed up by the system of specialised music training, national music colleges and professional musicians.

These activities by elite musicians perpetuating the musical heritage of the past in public concerts made up the most visible manifestation of classical music. But they did not constitute the whole of the classical musical world as it was realised in practice. Certainly this particular model deeply influenced even those on the face of it far removed from the specialist performances of highly qualified professionals. But, as will be clear, there was also a whole grassroots sub-structure of local classical music. Though perhaps 'invisible' to most scholars, in practice this was the essential local manifestation of the national music system, and also (as emerged in chapter 2) both interacted with it and formed its foundation. One aspect was the provision of audiences with the necessary skills of appreciation for professionals coming to give concerts locally, but it extended far beyond this to the whole system of local training, playing, actively practising musical groups and public performances by local musicians.

This ideal classical model was a powerful one which, however vague at the edges, implicitly moulded people's views of music and of their own participation in it at the local level. They were taking part, it was assumed, in a high art form validated by an authorised historical tradition and a structure of professional specialisation in which experts had to undergo rigorously assessed training ultimately controlled by the highest members of the profession. Of course not everyone who went to a classical concert, learnt the piano or played the violin in a local orchestra had formulated this explicitly or expected his or her own performance to measure up to the highest level of this ideal. Nevertheless, the model had a profound influence throughout the musical groups and activities that were widely seen as part of the world of classical music.

The local awareness of links with the wider classical world and its authorised canon from the past came out in many contexts. One concrete form was the printed scores and music 'parts' which were a necessary channel for transmission and performance among local classical groups, both instrumental and vocal. These were often borrowed rather than bought and when a local choir, say, found itself, as so often, singing from old and well-marked copies, it was easy to picture the earlier choirs 20, 30, even 50 years ago singing from the selfsame copies—and repertoire—of classical choral music in the days when, perhaps, those parts cost just one penny. Local performers could also regard themselves as the amateur counterparts of the specialist professionals, their reflection at the local level, playing
The classical music world at the local level

occupations does not stand up: many (though not all) choirs were very mixed.

The same applied to instrumental players, despite the elite nature of some smaller ensembles. Piano and organ playing were widespread, sometimes still learnt on a self-taught basis (especially in church contexts), and even instrumental groups were not all highly select. The Wolverton Light Orchestra, for example, went back far into the local history of Wolverton, the town long dominated by the local railway works. It was first founded as the Frank Brooks Orchestra after the First World War by a bastemaster of the Bucks. Volunteers who also conducted the local brass band, and was later renamed the Wolverton Orchestral Society. Between the wars it played light music with a First World War flavour, the thirty or so players giving regular winter concerts in local cinemas. It was revived after the Second World War, but later took the title Wolverton Light Orchestra to make clear that in contrast to the newly founded Sherwood Sinfonia their policy was to play smaller-scale works rather than symphonies. This they were still doing very effectively in the 1980s, giving six or seven concerts a year, mainly around the Wolverton area, with a playing membership of about thirty. By then there was a fair proportion of local schoolteachers in the orchestra, but over the years—and to some extent still—it had been strongly rooted in the local community and still had a mainly self-taught conductor from the local railway works. It would be hard to regard this as a select elite or middle-class activity in the sense often attached to those terms.

All in all, the picture was a varied one. The high-culture model of classical music should not lead us to conclude without further question that the musicians who in practice made up the classical music world at the local level were themselves members of some clear elite or drawn predominantly from some single class. For Milton Keynes, at least, the evidence points to a weighting towards teachers and fairly high-status occupations in several of the more aspiring instrumental groups, but otherwise—and particularly in the choirs—great heterogeneity of background, education and occupation.

The power of the specialist model, then, which focusses attention on professional concerts and national performing organisations, should not be allowed to obscure the equally real practices of local performance, training and appreciation. This classical ideal—misleading though it can be—is nevertheless of great relevance for the local scene. It provides a framework for the local practice, and without it one justification and measure for the many local orchestras, choirs and instrumental ensembles would be lacking.

The recognised tradition of the classical repertoire and the currently accepted styles of presentation also provide local groups with a rationale which they both draw on and help to perpetuate. All in all the over-arching classical music model on the one hand and the local performers and enactors

however imperfectly from the same classical canon. It was this pervasive model of the lengthy and highly valued classical tradition which ultimately set the definitions of the musical activities in which local amateurs were engaged.

Amidst these many locally based classical musical activities, what kind of people were the main participants? Is the prevalent assumption justified that classical music is primarily a 'middle-class pursuit' or confined to the 'elite' rather than the 'common people'? Judging by Milton Keynes there was certainly one sense in which this was true: if one focusses primarily on highly trained specialist musicians and the national institutions in which they participate, this is almost by definition an elite and select world; and insofar as this model influenced people's interpretations, classical music was indeed pictured as, in its fullest and best form, a high-art pursuit for the few. But, as becomes clear by examining the local situation, the actual practice which upholds and perpetuates the classical music world consists of more than just these elite musicians. The local amateurs and small-scale events also play an essential part. In their case it is by no means so evident that an elite or a 'middle class' label is correct. Indeed my main conclusion—however banal—was that local musicians and participants in local musical activities varied enormously in terms of educational qualifications, specialist expertise, occupation, wealth and general ethos.

Some musical groups did approach more nearly than others to the ideal of the expert professionals in terms of specialist musical qualifications, and this often—though not always—went along with the kinds of jobs or backgrounds loosely referred to as middle class. The leading amateur orchestra, the Sherwood Sinfonia, was a good example. Players had gone through the formal examinations of the national music institutions, and there was a high proportion of local music teachers and of individuals in high-status occupations among their members. But even here there were exceptions, like the young sausage-maker, later music shop assistant, who besides being a Sherwood Sinfonia violinist was a keyboard player and composer with a local rock group, or pupils from local comprehensive schools not all in the 'best' areas. The amateur and widely based emphasis within English music was particularly noticeable in the choirs, with their long tradition of extensive local participation without formalised musical expertise or selective background. It was true that the older pattern of local choral societies made up of a cross-section from one locality was—with the change in transport arrangements perhaps—being replaced in the 1980s by choirs recruited on a city-wide rather than neighbourhood basis, but both locality and a wide mix of backgrounds were still evident in the church and school choirs (see chapters 15 and 16). In such cases generalisation about classical music practitioners coming from just one social background or set of
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

of the tradition on the other interact together in a complex and varied way to transmit and sustain, carry and form, the national and enduring world of classical music so characteristic of this country as a whole and so richly practised at the local level

5

The brass band world

Given the well-known association of brass bands with the North, the strength and continuity of the local brass band tradition came as something of a surprise. For there were five to eight main brass bands in and around Milton Keynes in the early 1980s (the exact numbers depending on just where one draws the boundaries): the Wolverton Town and British Rail Band, the Woburn Sands Band, and the Bradwell Band (all going back many decades), and the more recent Stantonbury Brass, the re-formed Bletchley Band and (from 1984) the Broseley Brass; also regarded as in a sense local were the century-old Great Horwood Band and the Heath and Reach Band, in villages about five miles from the city boundary. There were also youth bands, bands connected with the Boys' Brigades and similar groups, and Salvation Army bands in Bletchley and Bradwell. Brass band gatherings like the Bletchley spring festivals had been a local tradition for some time, and were currently concentrated in two annual events, with 50 or so brass bands coming from all over the country to the February 'entertainment contest', and a massed concert by local bands every autumn.

The main bands contained 15 to 30 amateur players each, fluctuating according to the fortunes of the band at any one time, the regulation 'competition band' being 25 plus conductor. Their instruments were the standard brass combination of cornets, trombones, baritone and tenor horns, euphoniums, B♭ and E♭ basses, and percussion, played by members of many different ages and, in most of the bands, of both sexes. They made frequent public appearances (far more often than the choirs and orchestras) - highly visible performances, because of the loudness of brass instruments, the tradition of playing in the open, and their distinctive uniforms.

Brass band players were exceptionally articulate about their traditions; 'it's a world on its own', I was constantly told, 'a whole world'. Among all the musical spheres in Milton Keynes, it was the brass bands and their players that most emphatically made up a self-conscious 'world' with its own specific and separate traditions.
The brass band world

Awareness of their proud history thus played a part in local activities, and to some extent this continuity was striking. The tradition of informal learning was also still influential, and there were still many family links and loyalties within the bands. The competition world was sometimes another continuing context for performances and aspirations, while the tradition of service to 'the community' and appearances at local events remained a valued one, and at least some players still spoke of the ideal of bands as essentially made up of 'ordinary working lads'.

This traditional image of the 'brass band movement' was thus of real relevance, influencing repertoire, mode of training, self-image and family and community links. However, as even some players themselves admitted, the picture was also changing, and local brass band practice often did not fit with the traditional image.

For one thing the playing of brass instruments was becoming more assimilated to the 'classical' music model, and the modes of learning and performance were changing. Brass instruments were energetically taught in the schools by peripatetic teachers on the same basis as other classical instruments, supplementing the bands' own youth training schemes and informal teaching. Partly as a result, more girls were learning. Milton Keynes brass bands included female players, and in some of the younger bands girls were actually in the majority – very different from the past. New groups were founded which, unlike the older bands, drew their models not just from inherited tradition but from televised performances and classical instrumentalists.

Brass bands were also part of the high-profile cultural developments promoted by the MKDC. One of the first ensembles off the ground in the show-piece Stantonbury Education Campus was Stantonbury Brass, a youth band run by the Stantonbury Music Centre – an effective choice given the shorter lead time for training up a viable brass than string group. This successful young band was invited to perform at MKDC and BMK-sponsored events and to represent Milton Keynes abroad. Again, the Milton Keynes brass band festival, though building on established local bands, was directly encouraged by the new city's administration (which happened to include some influential brass enthusiasts). For many, therefore, brass bands were not a separate world of lower-class or 'popular' as against 'high' culture, but a recognised part of official cultural events in the city. The links with classical music were also increasingly accepted by players and audiences generally, not just because of school brass teaching but through the widely watched BBC 'Young Musician of the Year' competition, in which brass instrumentalists always formed one section. One recent winner was claimed as a 'local boy' (he came from Bedford and had played as a boy with local brass bands); this added new prestige to brass band playing, and the number of children (or rather parents) interested in brass
The brass band world

Meeting with formally conducted proceedings. They were also hierarchically organised under a permanent conductor (sometimes with assistant) who directed the practices and the public performances, assisted by a committee. Unlike some earlier brass bands they were not sponsored (apart from the launch money for the new Broseley Brass) and with the partial exception of the Wolverton Town and British Rail Band, who still held meetings in the British Rail Engineering canteen, they were not attached to particular works, but supported themselves as independent bands from their own contributions.

A great deal of authority lay with the conductor (sometimes entitled musical director), backed up by the committee. The Bradwell Band constitution, redrawn in 1978, stated that the conductor or his deputy had full control of band personnel during engagements with the right to report any irregularity to the committee, who would 'deal with the offending playing member'. Similarly he was to report any playing member frequently absent from practices or performances without his permission (a more stringent rule than for many other types of local musical group), and in general 'when in uniform, playing members must uphold the dignity of the Band at all times, and engage in no activity that would bring the Band, Trustee and Patrons into disrepute. The conductor shall refer to the committee any breach of this rule by any member.' The actual conduct of affairs is of course often less formalised than constitutions suggest, and an atmosphere of camaraderie and enjoyment was one noticeable characteristic of local brass bands. Nevertheless there was also a definite air of authority at band events, and practices were hierarchically directed sessions when people worked at the conductor's bidding in a highly disciplined setting which players felt strongly obligated to attend.

In addition to routine practices, the bands all took on performing commitments, especially in the summer and at Christmas (see below). Some also competed, and new local and regional competitions had been developing which several local bands entered. The Woburn Sands Band, for example, after being out of the competition world for a time, had begun competing again about ten years before and was advancing up the national grading system. Stantonbury Brass and the Bletchley Band also entered competitions regionally and the new Broseley Brass were already having success. Other bands concentrated more on local appearances, but the tradition of competitiveness was still a powerful one even for currently non-competing bands, coupled with an awareness of the distinctiveness and pride of each separate band.

The competition world also had its own rituals. This made heavy demands on band members, for it meant not only playing at as high a standard as they could possibly achieve, but also the necessary travel and assessment of their own and other performances. The sense of occasion in
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

these highly structured and intensive competitions had much to do with the enthusiasm of brass band players both for the ‘brass band movement’ as a whole and for their strong identification with their own bands.

Competitions were not the only occasions for band loyalty and sense of performance. Local brass bands had an accepted obligation to play at local events and in the community that they regarded as, in some sense, ‘their own’. Local fêtes, carnivals, outdoor carol services, charity occasions, the big events at Christmas and the Remembrance Day rituals all regularly involved appearances by one or another of the local bands.

Indeed at some times of the year, they had little respite from playing. For example, the Bradwell Band’s 1980 Christmas events as listed in the local newspaper’s notice included: Thursday 18 December, Eaglestone Hospital, 7.45 p.m.; Sunday 21st, The Green, Newport, 10.30 a.m.; Monday 22nd, New Bradwell streets, 7.45 p.m.; Tuesday 23rd, Bradville streets, 7.45 p.m.; Wednesday 24th, New Bradwell streets, 7.45 p.m. Their very similar programme in the Christmas season in 1982 (‘carolling in the every day from 11–25 December inclusive’) followed a long tradition in the area culminating in the famous ‘Christians Awake’ at six on Christmas morning in New Bradwell, a tradition which had not been broken for well over fifty years. It caused amusement as well as pleasure – who really wanted to be woken up or out at that time in the dark and freezing cold? – but was close to the hearts of band and New Bradwell residents alike, and players spoke warmly of going out before dawn, being greeted with drinks or gifts or, by the children, friendly abuse, and finding glasses of whisky waiting on the best doorsteps. Similarly, the Woburn Sands Band year’s events in 1981 covered over twenty performances – at local brass band festivals in February and October, the Regional Round of the National Brass Band Championship in March, then the Finals in London in October, local concerts in April and May, appearances at a dozen fêtes, carnivals, fairs and shows in local towns and villages throughout the summer, hymn-singing under the trees at Simpson village in July, Remembrance Day ceremonies in November, and in three OAP and Women’s Institute parties in December; in addition nearly three weeks in December were committed to carolling around the local area.

Given the intensity of such commitments on top of the regular band practices which timetabled their weekly activities throughout the year, it is not surprising that players spoke of the band ‘taking over their whole lives’, with consequences for all their other obligations; but they added that this was well compensated for by the ‘good humour and fun’ of band life. For some, brass playing took a dominant role in planning their lives; at least one player had settled in a particular village because of its band. For other band commitments had become almost ‘like a job’ – except that they felt less guilty about taking a holiday from their paid employment than from the band.

and a high proportion of their ‘free’ time was taken up by band obligations: performing and practising, travelling, organising uniforms and music, fundraising, or preparing and transporting instruments.

The band could be a source of more than just musical co-operation, for several bands had associated groups, and performed social as well as musical functions. The Wolverton Town and British Rail Band had a Ladies Supporters Club which met once a month at the BR Canteen at Wolverton to raise money for the band, while the Woburn Sands Band had its own madrigal society led by a born player who was also a singer; members met in turn at each other’s houses after Sunday morning band practice. Bands took some social responsibility for their members, marking events like weddings, deaths, departures, successes, and sometimes co-operating in baby sitting, arranging transport, and other less directly band-related exchanges such as sharing skills or information.

Participating in a brass band was more than just ‘going along for a blow’. Quite apart from the intensity of the musical commitment, band members – and above all the organising committee – inevitably became involved in a host of social and financial arrangements. Some of these practical aspects are explored further in part 4, but for brass bands particularly there was the heavy cost of instruments and uniforms and the importance of the music library. Brass instruments were not cheap, especially the larger ones, and brass players might find themselves using instruments worth £600, £1,000, £2,000 or more. Bands sometimes undertook to lend out instruments to players, a heavy drain on their resources, for £1,000 or more might have to be expended annually on purchases and repairs with all the fund-raising and background work that entailed. Uniforms too were expensive, and fitting out a band with a new uniform at the cost of many hundreds of pounds often had to be paid for through local fund-raising events and gifts – another way in which a band was bound into the locality in which it both played and raised money. Local people helped the Wolverton Town and British Rail Band to raise £500 for thirty-three new uniforms in 1981, for example, and were thanked by a free charity concert. The result was a highly visible group, clearly marked out by their military-style costume, clearly distinguished from other groups in the area (see figure 10).

The music library was an important band possession. This contained the multiple music parts played by the band and its predecessors, a mark not only of tradition through time but, as the players themselves put it, a priceless resource for them. Of course bands experimented from time to time with ‘newer’ music, but given the availability of their own library of the classic band repertoire there were economic as well as sentimental reasons for bands to make good use of the (literally) well-worn music that had come down to them. This was yet another sign of their unity as one named band, together with their other heavy investment in instruments and uniform.)

53
one factor in the long life of brass bands compared to other musical groupings.

Most bands were also bound by additional links of kinship and friendship. The local brass bands seemed to be full of relatives - at first sight, quite remarkably so until one recalls the common tendency for music in general and brass banding in particular to run in families and the long history of many of the local bands. It was common for several members of one family to play in a band, both within and across the generations, made easier by the lack of interest in age so long as members could play (in local bands the age range was from 9 to 70). Playing together forged intense relationships and provided a sphere in which more links could be formed which in turn bound the members together yet further. This was especially so in the longer established bands, but it also extended to the more recent ones, some of which had been helped by friends or relatives in the others (the Blechtre, for example, was founded by players from the Woburn Sands Band and the Bradwell Band). These links were not always and in every respect harmonious, of course - but this was perhaps all the more evidence of the bands' close-knit quasi-family nature.

It was not just the number of hours, social ties or amount of trouble that for participants constituted their affiliation to the brass band world, but the qualitative experience and the meaning this held for them. They were creating and transmitting music known to be part of the brass band repertoire, music coming down to them from the past as visibly enshrined in their own library and store of instruments or, if embarking on innovative ventures, doing this within the traditional brass conventions and in this sense making it their own. They were engaged in the joint act of making and receiving music in a known and valued tradition with its evocative visual as well as acoustic associations: the glittering polished instruments, band uniforms, proud display of uniforms, and quasi-military and tradition-bounded bearing.

The music above all was central, with its burst of sound filling the surroundings, arising from not just hours but years of skilled work and enacted by two dozen or so people participating as both individuals and
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

collectivity in a context in which age and background were of no account for 'you're pursuing an activity and in pursuit of that activity one loses oneself'. Building on their hours of practice, they were taking part in a performance to the highest standard the band could produce, an event unique to them yet tradition-drenched, of both public acclaim and rich aesthetic meaning. Small wonder that one player summed up banding as 'a way of life' which, despite the grumbles, 'I wouldn't be without'.

This sense of belonging to an integrated distinctive world, the inheritors of a proud and independent tradition, was further enhanced by the continuation of the long tradition of brass bands performing a public function for the local community. Of course such a statement needs qualification. What was seen as 'local' or 'the community' varied according to the speaker(s), the situation, even the time of year. And in some respects brass bands were just like any other musical groups performing in and around their own local base at both small and large events, not necessarily admired by or (probably unlike nineteenth-century bands) even known to all the local residents. That was striking, however, was the explicit ideology that brass bands had a direct relationship to their 'own' locality. The band was expected to turn out on 'public' occasions and to play a part in rituals of the musical, religious and official year, while in return members of the locality should support them not only in musical events but also in fund raising, particularly in street donations to band funds during the 'Christmas carolling'. The local band's public appearances at Christmas festivities, local carnivals and shows, ceremonies like the public opening of some new institution, or (as representatives of their own locality) in competitions or visits outside were seen as a necessary part of such events and an expected function of the band. The sense of let-down when there was once a mix-up and the local brass band did not play at the local Remembrance Day brought home the importance many people attached to this function - even those who did not particularly like brass band music.

One of the images associated with local brass bands in the 1980s (as earlier) was of a group performing an integrating and public role for their locality. Even though by the 1980s band players did not necessarily live in the immediate neighbourhood at all, local brass bands could still see themselves as somehow representing and enhancing the whole 'community' at public events - whatever that 'community' might be in different circumstances: the local village for the Woburn Sands Band; the town of Wolverton and its workers for the Wolverton Town and British Rail Band; or, in some situations, the whole developing new city of Milton Keynes. This aspect was no doubt facilitated by the ability of brass bands to perform so visibly and audibly in the open air, but even so it was remarkable that a musical tradition which was also seen as separate from others and was certainly not to everyone's taste should nevertheless have been accepted as being some...
The world of jazz was more fragmented than those discussed so far, in its musical styles, social groupings, training, and the model drawn on as participants. Jazz was regarded as distinctive, but at the same time as shading on one side into rock or folk, on the other into brass band or classical music. Within 'jazz' too there were several differing traditions each with its own devotees, making up networks of individuals and groups rather than the more explicitly articulated worlds of, say, brass band or folk music. But, as will become clear in this chapter, jazz was certainly played and appreciated in Milton Keynes. To the outsider it was less visible than classical, operatic and brass band music on the one hand or the plentiful rock bands on the other, but for enthusiast 'in the know' there were many opportunities for both playing and hearing jazz.

Take first the various playing groups. In the early 1980s there were about a dozen jazz bands in or around the Milton Keynes area. Some were local, some regional, some national. Their number increased with the growing interest in jazz and the availability of music shops and record stores. The bands were formed mainly by musicians who had met through their work or study in the area or had moved from other parts of the country. They played in a variety of venues, from pubs to schools to music clubs, and some had members who also played in other bands. The bands often performed at social events, private parties, and charity concerts, and some had regular slots in local clubs.

Jazz in Milton Keynes. From the start they were favoured by the new city planners, with whom the band leader (himself a senior management officer in local government) seemed to have consistent good relations. In contrast to other small bands they were encouraged to appear alongside the classical groups on large-scale occasions like the February Festival or the televised city centre Sunday Service in December 1981, and to represent Milton Keynes in cultural exchanges with its twin town of Bernkastel. Despite this official interest, the band very definitely regarded itself as an independent group, making a point of taking its name not from anything redolent of the 'new city' but from the historic Grand Union Canal.

Their main performances were in local pubs and clubs, where they had built up a core of 50 or 60 regular followers. By the early 1980s they were putting on around 60 gigs a year, mainly of 'trad jazz' music, and reckoned they had a repertoire of around 200 tunes. They had occasional rehearsals in the winter (about once a month), but for the rest of the year were busy enough with performances not to need additional practice, appearing frequently in the Bull in Stony Stratford, the Swan in Woburn Sands, or the King's Arms in Newport Pagnell. Their most favoured engagements - as for most jazz bands - were 'residencies', as when they appeared regularly on alternate Sunday evenings at the White Hart in 1980 and fortnightly at the jazz evenings at the Cock in North Crawley, as well as regular appearances at (among others) the Woughton Centre and the Great Linford Arts Centre in Milton Keynes itself and WAP in Wavendon. They also travelled further afield to perform at jazz clubs at Watford or Nottingham as well as playing for private occasions like weddings or, from time to time, free for causes like Christian Aid or local charity organisations.

They took themselves seriously as musicians and as propagators of trad jazz, but had no intention of turning professional or regarding their playing as anything but a hobby, and so were content just to earn enough from fees to cover expenses like transport, amplification, advertising and telephone. The current members were in full-time paid employment: art lecturer, local government officer, teacher, musical instrument repairer, artificial limb maker and graphic artist. They could thus afford to enjoy in their passion for jazz in both the Original Grand Union Syncopators and the other bands they played in, free of obligation to others.

The first two had much in common. They shared the same basic format of six players: clarinet or saxophone, trumpet or cornet, and trombone (the 'front line' where the solo spots were concentrated) with a rhythm section of banjo, percussion and (string) bass, some players doubling on occasion as vocalists. Both bands had regular performances both locally and (less often) further afield to enthusiastic audiences.

In other ways they differed considerably. The Original Grand Union Syncopators started up in Bletchley in 1975, reputedly the first real jazz band
The Fenny Stompers had the same enthusiasm for traditional jazz but in other respects were very different. In contrast to the higher education of art students and diplomas of the Original Grand Union Syncopators all but one of the Fenny Stompers had finished full-time education at 15 or 16 and, by now in their thirties or forties, were involved in such work as warehouseman, self-employed plumber, school lab technician and carpenter; there was only one teacher. Unlike the Original Grand Union Syncopators, some of whom had had more formal musical training, they were mostly self-taught as instrumentalists. They were formed in May 1978 under the title of Red River Stompers. After Fenny Stratford, they were soon changed to Fenny Stompers after Fenny Stratford, where their leader Dennis Vick lived. Despite some changes of personnel, especially among the drummers, the band with its nucleus of two brothers quickly took off, not least because of its leader's exploitive of free publicity in local newspapers. Within a few years their smart uniform of pink and white or red shirts with black trousers became well known among jazz audiences around the area and beyond.

By the early 1980s they were in demand for gigs two or three times a week. They performed not only at local pubs and clubs like the Bull Hotel in Fenny Stratford, the Bletchley Conservative and Naval Clubs or the Crazy Horse Arms in Wolverton, but also for paid performances at, for example, the Riverboat Shuffle for the Wimbledon Squash and Badminton Club, the

Horwood House fete arranged by British Telecom, or the British Stock Car Racing Supporters' Dinner Dance in Solihull, as well as working men's clubs around the area. They also played for fund-raising events, charitable occasions for senior citizens, and a Women's Institute Christmas party for the disabled. They also managed to arrange some regular bookings like the monthly Sunday lunchtime spot at the Swan Hotel in Fenny Stratford during 1979, and regular appearances at Ye Olde Swan, Woughton-on-the-Green, or the Coffee Pot at Yardley Gobion.

Like other bands, they too failed to get a permanent jazz club going within Milton Keynes to match the long-continuing jazz evenings at the Cock in North Crawley to which many enthusiasts went, and their various local attempts (like the Swan sessions in Fenny Stratford) were short-lived. But their playing regularly drew audiences of 70–100 people, and at their total of around 140 performances a year by 1982 showed the appeal of jazz in the area despite its relatively fragmented organisation. They were said to be less adventurous musically than the Original Grand Union Syncopators and with a smaller repertoire, but their particular version of Dixieland New Orleans jazz for people 'to sing along to and have a good time' was popular among local audiences from a wide range of social backgrounds and organisations.

The T-Bone Boogie Band was different yet again. As they themselves publicised it, they went in for 'rhythm and blues with an element of self ridicule', for 'blues and mad jazz' and, as one of their admirers expressed it, 'boogie, ragtime, bop and riddim 'n' blooz'. They presented themselves as a 'wild band', but their act followed many traditional jazz and blues sequences, with beautiful traditional playing interspersed with their own wilder ensembles of blues. They spoke of these as 'improvised out of nowhere, on the spur of the moment', but they were in practice based on long hours of jamming together as a group.

The nucleus of the band was the headmaster of a local school for handicapped children, Trevor Jeavons, an expert on the boogie piano, and Tracey Walters, a local youth worker who played the harmonica as well as producing extravagant vocals and wild clowning around for the audience. In all by 1982 it consisted of six players, including a schoolboy and a social worker. The somewhat unexpected but extremely popular combination of instruments was acoustic piano, saxophone, lead and bass guitars (sometimes replaced by string bass), harmonica, drums and vocals. The group had grown gradually from a series of informal jamming sessions by Trevor Jeavons and Tracey Walters in the foyer of the Woughton Centre at Sunday lunchtimes under the informal title of The Jam Band which used to draw in a large and enthusiastic audience. By September 1981 they had taken on the name of T-Bone Boogie Band to indicate both their rhythm-and-blues character with a passing reference to T-Bone Walker as well as the T for
Jazz

Their entertainment aim was obvious in their performances. The lead singer’s extravagant antics, the excited and active audience, the explicit air of enjoyment and their unconventional clothes were all part of the occasion. ‘We like to entertain people’, as Trevor Jeavons explained it, ‘which is why we dress rather outrageously sometimes. People like it.’ They themselves encouraged this extravagant image further by the ironically drawn self-portraits in their advertisements, designed to bring out the ‘madness’ so much appreciated by their fans. On their favourite home ground, the foyer in the Woughton Centre, their audiences regularly included people of all ages ‘from babies to OAPs’, which was just how they wanted it, and it was usual wherever they played for the venue to be filled to capacity. Some groups followed them from gig to gig, replying energetically to their jokes (musical, verbal and gestural), and T-Bone Boogie playing always stirred up the audience, not so much to actual dancing or singing along but to an active engagement with the performance. The band’s own enjoyment was also clear as they played, with an air of mutual interaction, appreciation and, in a sense, pleased surprise as they presented their pieces from jokey songs like ‘Little fishy’ or ‘My baby’s gone down the plug hole’ to a more traditional slow ballad.

The presentation of the T-Bone Boogie Band’s music was designed to bring out their ‘crazy’ image, eliciting active audience participation and a ‘fun’ atmosphere. The emphasis on enjoyment should not obscure the enduring musical centre of their performances, however. The cassette that they recorded ‘Live at Woughton’ in 1982 was treated seriously in the ‘Album of the Week’ column in one of the local newspapers – which seldom took a local example – on the grounds that the band had ‘proved that “fun music” can also be good music’ in their ‘remarkably professional sounding debut offering’. There was certainly far more to their playing than the visual clowning, not least the lyrics, music and piano playing of Trevor Jeavons himself, and the band’s practised improvising in the traditional blues style. In some eyes the T-Bone Boogie Band’s light-hearted exhibitionism made them less orthodox than the Original Grand Union Syncopators, Fenny Stompers, Momentum or the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen, but, whatever their idiosyncratic presentation, they were still part of the local jazz and blues offerings, one of the few local jazz groups performing at the local Great Linford Jazz Festival in July 1982, and immensely admired by some local jazz enthusiasts for their musical as well as ‘fun’ interest. Together with the other jazz bands in the area – all in practice varied in terms of instruments, personnel, background and detailed musical tastes – the T-Bone Boogie Band formed part of the contemporary realisation at the local level of the traditional jazz and blues storehouse of musical themes and idioms in a form no less ‘real’ than the more ‘serious’ offerings of other bands.

These three bands were not the only jazz groups functioning in Milton
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

Jazz

were tied neither to written forms nor to exact memorisation, but rather engaged in a form of composition-in-performance following accepted stylistic and thematic patterns. This, of course, is a well-known characteristic of jazz more generally — not that anyone has ever managed to define ‘jazz’ too precisely — so it was no surprise to find it at the local level in the views and behaviour of those classifying themselves as jazz players. Local musicians often commented on the freedom they felt in jazz as compared to either classical music or rock. One commented that with rock ‘it’s all happened already’ (i.e., already developed in prior rehearsals), whereas in jazz the performance itself was creative; another player explained his enthusiasm for jazz through the fact that ‘it allows a lot of expression for the individual’. Similarly a local jazz drummer talked about how in classical playing, unlike jazz, he had had ‘no real chance to create in a number, no choice about what to do’ and so ultimately preferred playing jazz to classical music.

This aspect was also very apparent in the performance of local jazz players. Far more than other musicians they would break into smiles of recognition or admiration as one after another player took up the solo spot, and looked at each other in pleasure after the end of a number, as if having experienced something newly created as well as familiar. As one local jazz player put it, ‘we improvise, with the tunes used as vehicles, so everything the group does is original’. Local jazz musicians often belonged to several jazz bands, moving easily between different groups. A musician who played both jazz and rock explained this in the following terms: with a rock band you are dependent on joint practising since the whole performance is very tight, whereas with jazz, providing you have learnt the basic conventions, ‘I can play traditional jazz with a line-up I’ve not met before.’ Jazz groups were thus less likely to have regular rehearsals than the other small bands: when they did play together it was often based on their general jazz skills rather than specific rehearsals of particular pieces. This open nature in performance also explained the high proportion of jazz ‘residencies’ by which the same band was booked to appear at the same venue once every fortnight or so. Audiences were likely to get tired of the same music time after time (a problem for rock and country and western bands), but were not bored by the more fluid jazz performances: ‘numbers are practically made up on the spot’.

Where jazz enthusiasts spoke of local jazz they often described it in terms of the venues where one could regularly hear jazz bands performing. Jazz was less prominent locally than other kinds of music and apparently did not have the historical roots found among local brass bands, operatic groups or choirs. But by the early 1980s there was a series of jazz clubs and pubs in and around Milton Keynes which could be visited in rotation by an enthusiast over any given week, chief among them being the Cock and the Bull Hotel
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

in Stony Stratford, the Bull (Newport Pagnell), the Galleon (Wolverton), the Holt Hotel in Aspley Guise, and the Cock Inn in North Crawley. Other venues included the Swan at Woughton House Hotel, the Bedford Arms, Ridgmont, the Magpie Hotel, Woburn, the foyers bar at the Woughton Centre, the Swan in Woburn Sands, the regular 'Jazz at the Stables' evenings at the WAP, Muzaks at the New Inn, and, for a few weeks in mid 1981, the Eight Belles in Bletchley. Some pubs organised weekly or fortnightly 'jazz clubs'. For example the Bull in Newport Pagnell at one point ran a jazz club every Wednesday alternating the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen and the Alan Fraser Band, while the Holt Hotel Jazz Club functioned every Thursday. Other pubs put on either occasional jazz groups or, more often, arranged weekly, fortnightly or monthly jazz performances on a regular basis.

Some of these arrangements lasted longer than others, but at any one time there was live jazz being played in the area at least once or twice in the week, often more. For example June 1982 saw the following: the Original Grand Union Syncopators on alternate Thursday nights at the Woughton House Hotel, with the Cock Inn in North Crawley continuing its fortnightly jazz event; the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen on the last Saturday of every month at the Coffee Pot, Yardley Gobion; the Tuesday jazz evenings at the Woughton Centre, alternating between the Bull in Newport Pagnell and the Original Grand Union Syncopators; and the Alan Fraser Band and the Original Grand Union Syncopators, and the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen on the first and third Wednesday of every month. Most of these performances were in local pubs, and the Bull in Newport Pagnell had, relatively little patronage from public bodies. The regular jazz evenings in local pubs and clubs were the most viable performances. But bands were also asked to perform at private occasions, and in Stony Stratford the Bull (Newport Pagnell), the Galleon (Wolverton), the Holt Hotel in Aspley Guise, and the Cock Inn in North Crawley. Other venues included the Swan at Woughton House Hotel, the Bedford Arms, Ridgmont, the Magpie Hotel, Woburn, the foyers bar at the Woughton Centre, the Swan in Woburn Sands, the regular 'Jazz at the Stables' evenings at the WAP, Muzaks at the New Inn, and, for a few weeks in mid 1981, the Eight Belles in Bletchley. Some pubs organised weekly or fortnightly 'jazz clubs'. For example the Bull in Newport Pagnell at one point ran a jazz club every Wednesday alternating the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen and the Alan Fraser Band, while the Holt Hotel Jazz Club functioned every Thursday. Other pubs put on either occasional jazz groups or, more often, arranged weekly, fortnightly or monthly jazz performances on a regular basis.

Some of these arrangements lasted longer than others, but at any one time there was live jazz being played in the area at least once or twice in the week, often more. For example June 1982 saw the following: the Original Grand Union Syncopators on alternate Thursday nights at the Woughton House Hotel, with the Cock Inn in North Crawley continuing its fortnightly jazz event; the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen on the last Saturday of every month at the Coffee Pot, Yardley Gobion; the Tuesday jazz evenings at the Woughton Centre, alternating between the Bull in Newport Pagnell and the Original Grand Union Syncopators; and the Alan Fraser Band and the Original Grand Union Syncopators, and the Mahogany Hall Jazzmen on the first and third Wednesday of every month. Most of these performances were in local pubs, and the Bull in Newport Pagnell had, relatively little patronage from public bodies. The regular jazz evenings in local pubs and clubs were the most viable performances. But bands were also asked to perform at private occasions. Included among these was the Folk Festival at the local Linford Arts Centre in mid 1982. In addition, the Middle School Festivals, when the specially composed pieces sometimes included jazz, and in events otherwise mainly devoted to folk, brass band or classical music modes. The main jazz world, however, insofar as it existed as something separate in Milton Keynes, was primarily represented by the players in the established jazz groups and their followers in the area.

Who were these local jazz players in Milton Keynes? Practically all fell towards the amateur end of the 'amateur/professional' continuum in the sense both of relying on other means than jazz for their income and in their view of their musical activity as basically enjoyment than job. The question is an interesting one, however, because of the conflicting general views about this. For some, jazz is 'the people's music' (Finkelstein 1975), whereas others suggest that it is now an intellectual rather than truly popular form (see Collier 1978, pp. 3–4; Lloyd 1974). This ambiguity actually fitted quite well with the heterogeneous membership of local groups. On the one hand there were many highly educated jazz players, including teachers, administrators and community workers, and several who had developed their jazz enthusiasm at art school. But as demonstrated by the Benny Stompers among others, there were also players who had left school early, were in skilled or semi-skilled manual work rather than professional jobs, or were unemployed; some were still at school. The one clear pattern was that they were overwhelmingly male (apart from the one explicitly female band) and predominantly in their thirties or forties. There were a few younger players like the primary school group, but essentially jazz playing seemed not to be a teens or twenties pursuit.

This lack of any single set of social characteristics also came out in the different channels through which local players were recruited into jazz. Some began through classical music at school, with the characteristic classical emphasis on reading music and executing it with little variation. Players coming through this route were usually confident about their instrumental skills and musical understanding but less happy performing in a context where—as in jazz—close reliance on written music was not appropriate; indeed such players were sometimes criticised by co-players for their lack of flexibility. Rather more players had taught themselves, sometimes in an interest in rock music. This often included some hints or informal help from friends or colleagues, but seldom any formal teaching (as that is understood in the classical music world), and meant learning jazz skills through listening to and copying recordings and, above all, playing within a group—a basic aspect of the jazz experience, whatever the original channel. Others again had a mixture of backgrounds, like the player who confessed he could 'read the dots' but had essentially 'learnt on the job'. Musically as well as socially, jazz musicians in Milton Keynes came from varied backgrounds.

The same complexity applied to audiences, for an interest in jazz did not seem to be the special preserve of any one section in Milton Keynes.
Musical worlds in Milton Keynes

Certainly it was not confined to a single age group and included women as well as men. 'From babies to OAPs' was the T-Bone Boogie Band's boast, and this was probably the picture for other bands too, perhaps with particular emphasis on middle-aged groups. There was also the complication that some jazz clubs attracted audiences enthusiastic about one camp of jazz and unwilling to listen to others ('trad' as against 'modern' jazz in particular). Some bands, like the Original Grand Union Syncopators, Momentum or the T-Bone Boogie Band, built up their own fan groups who followed them from gig to gig and made up a large proportion of the audience when they appeared as the resident band. As with other kinds of performance, of course, such groups were probably attracted not only by the particular type of music offered but also by the company and social occasion, the dancing or talking in a pleasant atmosphere, or because of the players. As one band member put it, you couldn't expect all the audience necessarily to be 'mad on jazz'; for another - as he explained not unappreciatively - his wife quite liked jazz, but really went along to chat with the other musicians' wives, laugh at us, and have a good chin-wag.

Jazz in Milton Keynes, then, was more a fluid and impermanent series of bands and venues than an integrated and self-conscious musical world. There were not strong historical precursors in the area, and the local players never managed to set up a permanent venue where they could be sure of regularly hearing jazz by local and regional players over a matter of years in addition, apart from the (general purpose) Musicians' Union, to which few local players belonged, there was no national association to which local groups could affiliate (unlike the classical, folk, operatic and brass band worlds) - or, if there was, it was apparently of little interest to Milton Keynes players. In all, there seemed to be a less distinctive view of what 'jazz' was and should be than with some of the other forms of music in Milton Keynes, and the experiences of jazz players and enthusiasts were defined more by the actual activities and interactions of local bands that labelled themselves as 'jazz' than by any clearly articulated ideal model.

Despite this, there were shared perceptions and experiences - unarticulated though these were - of what it was to be a jazz player and to play jazz. This was shown most vividly in the way jazz players, far more strikingly than rock musicians, went in for membership of more than one jazz group and moved readily between bands; it was easy to ask guests to come and jam, from named stars from outside or ex-members who happened to be around to a ten-year-old boogie-woogie pianist from the audience. Far though both the form of music-making and the constitution of the groups were in a sense fluid, there were definite shared expectations about the jazz style of playing, the traditional formulae, and the modes of impressing within recognised conventions: 'all jazz lovers know the tunes already'.