

TUNES FROM THE ARCHIVES

Fiona Tait

Birmingham was nominated UK City of Music for 1992, and a wealth of diverse musical performances is scheduled to entertain us throughout the year. This is nothing new: Birmingham has always been a city of music; a thriving and sometimes famous one. Now seems a good time to lift the lid on the Archives' musical box and listen in on history!

It has to be admitted at the outset that, until the 20th century, you will have to imagine the sounds. Only with the advent of the Folk Revival in the early 1960s can visitors actually hear tape recordings of music and song.

The earliest piece of music in the Archives must be the setting for the Lord's Prayer, given in the beautifully illustrated Guild Book of Knowle (1451-1535).¹ Occasionally medieval music turns up unexpectedly, such as that on a wrapper for the Hagley Hall Court Rolls. This, too, is religious music.²

We seem to lack obvious references to music during the 17th century. What happened to the singers, dancers and lute-players of this period? Anyone finding payments to buskers or musicians in someone's accounts, please let me know!

The 18th century provides us with six solos, composed by one James Lyndon, organist of the Collegiate Church or Free Chapel Royal in Wolverhampton, music printed in 1751.³ Though writing primarily for the violin and thoroughbass, Lyndon claims that

All six solos stand lessons for the harpsichord. Several of the parts may be performed upon the German flute or hautboy.

Value for money, obviously!

The Archives Department holds the Rules and Orders of the Chappell Society,

... who have agreed to Meet at the House of Mr Jos. Cooke in the Cherry Orchard, Birmingham, begun 1766.⁴

Club night was on the first Wednesday in the month, and members not appearing by 7.30 pm were fined. Such fines, however, together with regular donations and charges for guests, helped to buy music scores and instruments, which could then be borrowed by members for practice during the month. (All damage to be paid for!) Any member who left the Society, or the widow or heir of one who died, was entitled to a proportion of the value of the books and instruments in stock. Admission charges to the concerts varied: it was sixpence for the guest of a member,

but if an indifferent Person desire to be admitted, he shall pay one Shilling.

Stewards were chosen to keep silence in the audience during concerts, and Rule 17 states

No Smoaking will be allow'd during the performance.

In the accounts of the Chappell Society, amid the payments for candles, for the teaching of boys and for performing, is the following item:

Jany 11 [1767]	To Mr Brown's Man for Carying the Bass Backward & forwards	1s 0d
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Any mention of music in 18th-century Birmingham would, of course, be incomplete without the appearance of Matthew Boulton and James Watt. Matthew Boulton was a notable contributor, and one of the first, to the funds raised by the Birmingham Music Festivals for the building and administration of the General Hospital. Perhaps less well known is that James Watt had trained as a mathematical and musical instrument maker before turning to engineering. His account book⁵ for a journey from Glasgow to London, Birmingham and Sheffield about 1767, shows that he bought

Tunes from the Archives - continued

4 Fiddles	40/-	£8 - -
6 do	21/-	6 6 -
6 do	15/-	4 10 -
6 do	8/-	2 8 -
8 bunch Roman strings @ 6/3 @8/-		3 12 -
Common strings sorted about		1 - -
2 Hautboys, 1 doz'n Reeds		1 - -
a Spinet, a Barrel Organ & a Clarionet		11 - -
		£37 16 -

There is a long (and incomplete) letter to Watt, c 1765, from Charles Claget in Dublin, earnestly asking for a dozen guitars to be sent him before the month is out. He goes on to request instructions on tuning a lute, compares the performance of lute and theorbo, and says

... I hear of a gentleman in Eng[lan]d who has made a guitar & for the right hand has fix'd 7 keys like the keys of a spinnet & quills in like manner strike the wires - what do you think of that scheem ...⁶

Almost a hurdy-gurdy?

In the Matthew Boulton Papers we find a letter to Boulton from William Fletcher of Church Street, Birmingham, 17 November 1800:

Sir,
You once was very Liberal towards me: that I shall never forget it: ... the only way I have to show you ... is to give you a Great treat in Music: And I now have it particularly in my power: ... as there is one of the Greatest Performers on the Pianoforte at my House & will be for this fortnight to come; Mr Field: he will Charm you beyond your Imagination: I have an Instrument down from London for his use: and if you wou'd give me leave will send it to the Soho at any time you think proper ...
Mr Moore, Field & my two Girls would make up an other sort of Concert which wou'd not be unpleasant ...⁷

Another letter which describes the discovery of a new musical instrument is from Thomas Edge to John Gough of Perry Hall in November 1824.⁸

... to my Surprise and Pleasure [I] found the Self Acting Piano to be A Most Elegant and fine tuned Cabinet Piano which plays with Keys as the Common Piano and also by Machinery ... It plays a Most Beautifull overture on one Barrell and 8 tunes on the other. The music is extreamly Grand and Changes from piano to Forte as the tunes Require.

The instrument cost about 200 guineas. Mr Edge goes on to describe another machine. This cheaper device

... plays four of Rossini's Most Beautifull pieces which continues to Play 40 Minutes without Winding up in a Mahogany Box, Price £50. I have no doubt did you but see it you would be the Purchaser to set it on your Side Board.

Many of the musicians mentioned in Birmingham seem to have been organists. Certainly many middle- and upper-class families encouraged their children to take music lessons on keyboard instruments. An indenture of apprenticeship, dated 11 January 1839, arranges for John Augustus Sharman of Edgbaston, organist, pianist and music master, to take as his apprentice Richard Read, son of Richard Read, excise officer, for five years, to provide full instruction, dinner and tea, for a cost of £99.⁹

On a different note, it was choral music that flourished in Birmingham in the 19th century. In December 1855 Mr J O Mason and Mr John Bragg gathered their musical friends together to discuss forming a society for the practice of choral and part singing. The Birmingham Amateur Harmonic Association was

... a union of the best vocal amateur talent of Birmingham for the study and practice of the higher class of musical competitions and the attainment of proficiency, precision and effect in choral and part song.¹⁰

The minutes, which survive from 1855-89, along with registers of members, records of rehearsals, programmes and music catalogues, show that the opening rehearsal tackled Mendelssohn's *St Paul*, performed to an audience of 300 by over 130 singers.

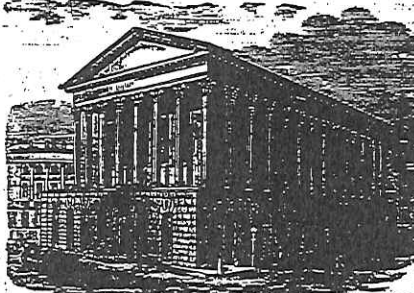
Tunes from the Archives - continued

'Regular practice, with careful attention to the instruction and beat of the conductor, will soon impart proficiency', wrote one critic.

One of their first tasks was to find a rehearsal space. Broad Street Assembly Rooms, part of Mr Jenkins' Coach Manufactory, were found to be ill-adapted for musical purposes. Dee's Assembly Rooms looked promising, as Mr Dee remarked

Your Society is just such a one as Birmingham requires and I will gladly let you have my room to practise in for mere expenses.

He could not, however, guarantee a free room once a month. The New Meeting Street Music Room was fitted with seats with backs to them and good lighting, but 'the situation is objectionable' and the room would not be available on Shrove Tuesday, 'a day on which, perhaps, the exertion of singing is somewhat undesirable.' Perhaps pancakes were not considered the ideal preparation for singing! They finally chose the pleasant front room of Oddfellows' Hall, at £35 a year rent.

PROGRAMME
OF THE
Birmingham Musical Festival,
IN
AID OF THE FUNDS
OF THE
GENERAL HOSPITAL,
TO BE HELD IN

THE TOWN HALL,
TUESDAY, WEDNESDAY, THURSDAY, AND FRIDAY,
AUGUST 26TH, 27TH, 28TH, AND 29TH, 1873.
UNDER THE DISTINGUISHED PATRONAGE OF
HER MOST GRACIOUS MAJESTY THE QUEEN,
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE PRINCE OF WALES, HER ROYAL HIGHNESS THE
PRINCESS OF WALES, HER ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUCHESS OF CAMBRIDGE
HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS THE DUKE OF CAMBRIDGE
THIRD ISSUE. "JOURNAL" PRINTING OFFICES BIRMINGHAM.

Birmingham is perhaps most famous, musically, for its Triennial Music Festivals, the first of which was in 1787, though Music Meetings to begin raising funds for the General Hospital had started back in 1768. From 1799 to 1849, the artistic director was John Moore, a businessman who numbered among his friends many musicians and singers and who helped to establish the importance of the Festivals in the world of music.

Most of the surviving records are of the administrative kind, dealing with ticket sales, organisation of programmes and musicians, fund-raising, furnishings and the correspondence and meetings needed to make everything run smoothly.¹¹

Amid numerous letters to John Moore, however, are several from Mendelssohn, including a review of the first performance of his *Elijah*, which, of course, he conducted himself in Birmingham Town Hall:

BRL Archives Division: MS 1470/59/6

Leipsic
28 September 1846

My dear Sir,

I have now returned home . . . Indeed the first performance of my *Elijah* exceeded all the wishes which a composer may feel at such an important moment and the evident good will of all the artists in the Orchestra as well as the kindness with which the audience received the work will be as long as I live a source of grateful recollection . . .¹²

An 1868 inventory of the Music Festival stores shows some of the props of performance:

iron railing for orchestra
 large box containing coppins for front of gallerys and orchestra
 1 fram'd organ looking glass
 132 stools stuff'd tops cov'd with American Cloth for Orchestra
 8 Entrance boards painted BCDEGHK
 84 Music Stands Iron jap[anne]d
 pillar and Bust of Mendelssohn on Staircase¹³

Other famous composers appear in the musical record. This letter from Walter Bache (1842-88), whose brother Edward played under Mendelssohn in that first performance of *Elijah*, talks of Liszt, under whom he had studied and whose music he promoted with enthusiasm.

Dear Sir,

Immediately after seeing you a few weeks ago, I wrote to my friend Madame Laussot at Florence asking for definite information as to Liszt's whereabouts during the month of June - I feel pretty certain in my own mind that Wagner would not write for any Festival whatsoever but I am very glad that you are resolved to try him as one can never tell what those great fellows will do - and the notion might please him . . .¹⁴

An important public figure in Birmingham and a great patron of the Music Festivals was Richard Peyton (1825-90). He was president of the Amateur Harmonic Association and the Festival Choral Society and left funds to provide for a Chair of Music at Birmingham University. The following is a letter from the Irish baritone, Allan James Foli, preserved in Peyton's autograph album.

Dear Mr Peyton,

I shall be here for rehearsal on Monday next. If the programme is not yet quite finished I think it is much safer not to put me down for a song in the second part of Thursday evening. I have Messiah in the morning and Crusaders in the evening which is rather high for me so I shall be completely tired out and not in condition to do 'Rage thou Angry Storm'.¹⁵

Popular culture also produced a wealth of musical entertainment. At the Botanical Gardens, recitals, brass bands and military marches featured regularly in fund-raising events. The programme on 12 September 1903 featured

Grand Banjo Concert by Mr Olly Oakley's Amateur Banjo and Mandolin Orchestra.

On 4 June 1904 there appeared

The Euterpean Orchestra directed by Misses Emilie and Annie Scott of Liverpool

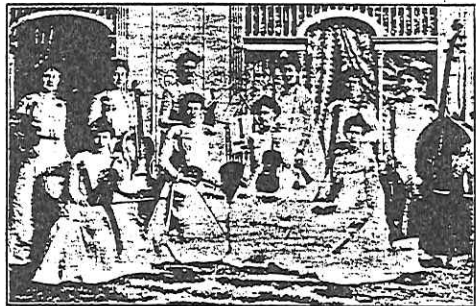
and the programme includes a photograph of this all-female orchestra. For the Children's Fete on 22 July 1905, the Pipers of the Scots Guards 2nd Battalion

. . . would be playing for sword dances on the Great Lawn. Before which the Pipers will roam at large over the Mountains and Glens of the Gardens, scaling the dizzy heights of the Floral Alps or plunging into the Cimmerian depths of the Hardy Fernery. The Piper's Motto: Keep yer 'air on.¹⁶

39/3/20

**THE BIRMINGHAM
 Botanical & Horticultural Society.**
Hon. Treasurer, NEVILLE CHAMBERLAIN, Esq., Highbery.
 Hon. Sec., Prof. HILLHOUSE, M.Sc., M.A., F.R.S., The University.

ON SATURDAY, JUNE 4th, 1904,
The "Euterpean" Orchestra
 DIRECTED BY
 The Misses EMILIE and ANNIE SCOTT.
 Liverpool.



Leader and Solo Violin	MISS ANNIE SCOTT.
First Violins.	Second Violins.
MISS MAY MAJOR.	MISS ETHEL WILLIAMS.
MISS MACHIN.	MISS SMITH.
Accessories and Solo Mandoline	MISS GRETA SCOTT <small>(Medallist)</small>
Viola.	CONTRA BASS.
MISS MABEL ELLISON.	MADAME MARY SCOTT.
Violoncello Solo	MISS JULIA E. SCOTT <small>(Medallist)</small>
Pianoforte	MISS EMILIE SCOTT <small>(Assoc. Pian., Trin. Coll., Lond.)</small>
Vocalist	MISS EVA DICKINSON.
Accompanist	MISS MAUD NEVILL.

UNDER THE DIRECTION OF
 MR OSCAR POLLACK

Tunes from the Archives - continued

Another country which featured much in popular entertainment in the early 20th century is Japan. This fashion for the oriental did not miss Birmingham. We have a scrapbook which once belonged to John Heywood, a leading light in the amateur dramatics scene in Moseley and district. His dramatic performances accompanied songs, concerts and recitations, usually for evenings of comedy and light entertainment to raise funds for schools, church-building or for the poor and needy. A concert at Moseley College in 1905 included an operetta called 'The Japanese Girl' and two 'action songs'; 'The Rainbow' and 'Fan Philosophy'. Another concert in 1906 included an action song called 'Japanese Umbrella'.¹⁷

In complete contrast, the records of the Birmingham Bach Club, founded in 1930, show a group wishing to perform Bach's music, particularly his lesser-known works, under conditions similar to those obtaining in his lifetime. The Club met in the Cathedral and a Bach Orchestra was soon founded to complement the choir.

The outbreak of the Second World War dealt a blow to social and musical entertainment in Birmingham, but the minutes of the Bach Club show that life continued as best it could. This club was fortunate to find assistance from Dame Elizabeth Cadbury, who provided a venue for performances at the Manor House in Northfield. In September 1940 the Secretary was instructed to write to Dame Elizabeth

... tactfully stating that the Committee greatly appreciated her kind offer to provide tea for those attending the Recital but at the same time pointing out that in view of the national situation it was really being too generous to us.¹⁸

One splendid creation to be found in Archives is the memorial volume to Sir Granville Bantock (1868-1946), a contribution by Birmingham Public Libraries to the 1951 Festival of Britain. It was largely compiled and illustrated by Arthur Hougham. Bantock was Principal of the Birmingham School of Music from 1900 to 1934, a prolific composer, conductor and performer and a very enthusiastic and energetic promoter of music. The memorial volume contains letters, drawings and photographs, and includes this reply from George Bernard Shaw to Christopher Edmunds, who arranged a memorial concert to Bantock in 1946. Shaw was asked to write a tribute for a special concert programme, and replied

Nothing is more unbearable at a concert than spoken tributes and messages. I shall certainly not be guilty of them. Give the audience music - his music - and no twaddle.¹⁹

And so to the actual sound of music - the archive that you can actually listen to! If you are interested in the folk revival, the rise of popular music in the 1950s and 1960s, and in the development of multi-culturalism, then this is for you. These elements can be found in the recordings, programmes, papers and books of Charles Parker, who was radio features producer at the BBC in Birmingham from 1959 to 1972. His career happily coincided with the appearance of the portable midget tape recorder and with this he collected the speech and songs of ordinary people, relayed without interpretation by actors. The radio ballads for which he is best known were syntheses of words, music, and songs both old and new, written and sung in traditional forms, mostly composed by Ewan McColl with music by Peggy Seeger. From them and others Parker also learned of the Ballads and Blues Club and of the wealth of folk music to be discovered. To assist with this, he founded the Birmingham and Midland Folk Centre in 1965 to concentrate on tracing Midlands songs. An offshoot of this was the folk club called the Grey Cock. This name came from a version of a rare folk song collected from Cecilia Costello, an Irish singer in Birmingham. In an article written for the *Ballads and Blues Yearbook* of 1963, Parker describes his discovery of the importance of the oral tradition:

... the intimate correspondence between actuality and folk song became apparent. I discovered this when in 1957 I was recording a group of old men in Wisbech market place gazing sadly on a group of farmhorses en route for the knacker's yard, and talking to themselves about the old hard horse ploughman's life. I discovered they were using terms and indeed whole sentences which corresponded almost exactly with the words of the Lincolnshire Ploughman's song, and not only the words but the subtle qualities of rhythm and inflexion in their speech accorded wonderfully with the movement of the song and melody. I knew I had stumbled on something important.

Parker was interested in all sorts of traditional music and folk song, and its use in documentary and social life: for protest, entertainment, private and public events. His visit to China in 1972 has given us tapes of Chinese music of that time, and his involvement with the multi-cultural arts activities of the 1960s and 1970s has left some information about less well-documented groups, such as the Asian Music Circle.²⁰

Let us end on a philosophical note. The following comes from the *Compendium Musicae* of Rosemary Savage, who was training to be a music teacher at Montaigu College in 1911.

The realm of music begins where the power of word finishes. It has the power to express the inexpressible. Music must affect because it is the language of feelings. A musician suffers, enjoys, laughs, weeps, wishes, loves, thinks, remembers in music . . .²¹

Bell-ringing to broadcasting, operas to orchestras, there's a wealth of musical history to be discovered in the Archives. You might even find that lost chord!

REFERENCES

All material Birmingham Central Library: Archives Division

- 1 IIR Grille ff 108r, 114r
- 2 347181 Hagley Hall Box 17
- 3 689792 IIR 38
- 4 MS 254/9, 10
- 5 B&W M1/2/7
- 6 B&W Box 26/1/1
- 7 MB Papers 232/168
- 8 Gough 478
- 9 MS 4/162
- 10 104/4936 ZZ 31; 104947 IIR 24; MS 551
- 11 MS 1470
- 12 MS 1292/5
- 13 MS 1470/5
- 14 MS 1552/ p 33
- 15 MS 1552 p 41
- 16 MS 1520/39/3
- 17 MS 1200/55
- 18 528939 IIR 29
- 19 627606 IIR 34
- 20 Charles Parker Archive; Birmingham and Midland Folk Club Archive; MS Grey Cock Folk Club
- 21 614229 IIR 32

TOWN HALL, BIRMINGHAM.
FEMALE
AMERICAN SERENADERS.



Madames Corz, Jumba, Wozki, Miami, Yarico, Jumba & Rose
The young ladies whose immense success in London has been made a theme of eulogy by the provincial and London Press will have the honour of appearing for the
First Time in Birmingham.
WEDNESDAY, June 9th, 1847.
POSITIVELY FOR THIS NIGHT ONLY
For the Benefit of the Widows and Orphans and Literary Fund of the Manchester Order of Odd Fellows.

THE INVITATION CARD OF THE COLOURED LADIES TO THE PUBLIC OF BIRMINGHAM.

<p>Fair Ladies, if we can on you prevail, To list our merry song and mournful tale, Thrice happy will we really play and sing, On tambourines, on bones and banjo string. Our native airs will suit your woe or weal, From "Dandy Jen" to hapless "Lucy Neal"; Sweet "Flora May," a new just published song, Rock the cradle, Lucy," "Take your time, Miss "Long" And many a lover's story, sad and true:</p>	<p>How de "Phantom Maiden" paddled her canoe; And den de fus—"Oh! sing, our work is ober!" Come deie seek Lady's hair wot corn and clober!" And last, not least, "De Invitation to de Hall!" "Come, dance wid me, come, dance wid me, and dance wid all." Of blue bells many a poet out has sung— We brown belles be, and daughters ob de sun; We ask de ladies, our piker sisters, to say— De gentlemen need no invitation to meet de fair.</p>
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The first judges of Music are emphatically invited to witness this Entertainment, the harmony of which has been pronounced a marvel in the history of Music. The New Songs sung by the Lady Serenaders are published by D'Almaine and Co., 25, Abchurch-lane, London, and may be had of all respectable Music-sellers in the United Kingdom.

BRL Archives Division: MS 1711

Birmingham Historian 9 (1993)