

## **Music and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Britain**

### **Introduction**

This digital concert series connects eighteenth-century London, Europe's greatest metropolis, as a European cultural centre to the city as a centre of empire. Britain's empire by the early eighteenth century was not on the model of the territorial empires of her European neighbours, ranging from the Roman Empire to the Habsburg, French and Russian Empires. It was a maritime empire or an 'empire of the sea'. By the 1760s the British Empire had come to mean Great Britain, Ireland as well as numerous British colonies and settlements across the world. Themes of global encounters, the exotic and empire formed some of the background for the reception and development of British musical culture during a period defined by Enlightenment, modernity and economic development. A culturally diverse musical society included composers and performers, audiences and benefactors connecting with Europe, the Atlantic world and Asia. The Warwick History Department currently has two interdisciplinary research centres where many of its participants are pursuing themes of empire, trade, global encounter, and enslavement. 'Musical Culture and Empire' brings musical culture to our histories, and this digital concert series supports today's musical cultural sector during this period of Covid-19.

### **London, empire and luxury**



*London in 1794*

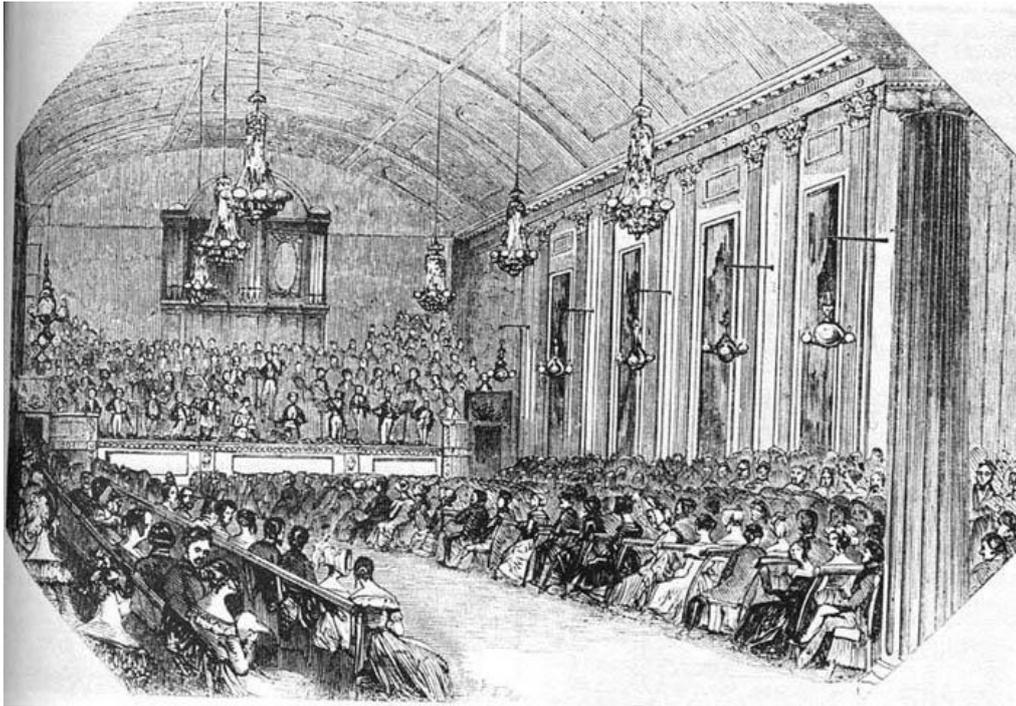
By 1700, London was already Europe's largest city, and held 11% of Britain's population. It grew from 500,000 inhabitants in 1700 to 675,00 in 1750 and reached 959,000 in 1800. 4,000 aristocratic and gentry families had homes in the city by 1700, stimulating the "London season". The London season, coinciding with the sitting of Parliament from November to June, brought the aristocracy and gentry from their country to their London residences. It marked the cycle of cultural events and polite entertainment in the capital. It brought not just elite families to London, but migrations of professional and service classes, including musical and theatrical performers.

Another 4,000 merchants, bankers, and wholesale traders, as well as a third of all English lawyers generated a vibrant consumer culture: London was not just the largest city in Europe, but a city of empire, with a large mercantile and commercial culture. It was a centre for shipping, trade, and the navy, connecting it with Europe, the Americas, Africa, and Asia. Its commerce brought colonial ambitions; it became an entrepot of the world's luxury goods. The slave trade is an integral part of its story. From early in the eighteenth century the Royal African Company and independent traders were sending an average of 60 slave ships a year to the West Coast of Africa and on to the Caribbean, returning with Britain's new luxury foodstuff: sugar. London's coffeehouses and sugar culture were part of a commercial culture conveyed in nearly 22,000 shops, warehouses and other retail outlets, as well as 200 leisure venues.

An extensive print culture of popular newspapers and news sheets, trade cards, bills and posters advertised all manner of goods and events. The Public Advertiser advertised many benefit concerts, musical performances and festivals, and there were large ticket-paying audiences. The first performance of George Frederic Handel's (1685-1759) 'Music for the Royal Fireworks' attracted 12,000 paying spectators for the rehearsal alone. Johann Mattheson, writing early in the century, summed up the commercial possibilities for musicians:

*'He who in the present time wants to make a profit out of music betakes himself to England. The Italians exalt music: the French enliven it; the Germans strive after it; the English pay for it well.'*

Musical events took place in the many theatres, and by the early 1740s in the pleasure gardens (especially Ranelagh in Chelsea), in the guildhalls, charitable foundations, and churches as well as specialist concert rooms. From the 1760s there were Hanover Square Concert Rooms (pictured below) and Pasquali's Rooms on the new Tottenham Court Road.



*The Hanover Square Rooms in 1844*

The Royal Academy of Music was founded under the patronage of George I in 1719 to promote opera, also using funds from the slave-trading Royal African Company (1672-1752). George Frederic Handel became its inaugural musical director until his death in 1759. His prolific composition and performance fostered a great public enthusiasm for Italian opera and Italian singers, as opera became newly accessible to the middle classes. Handel also developed the popularity of the oratorio form. This saved on expensive theatrical staging and was ideal for many of the types of concert venues then available, for example the chapel of the Foundling Hospital, founded in 1740.

### **Provincial musical culture & sociability**

This efflorescence of secular and sacred musical culture in the capital found its counterpart in the provinces: or the growth of Britain's provincial and smaller towns far surpassed that of the rest of Europe, apart from the Netherlands. By the early eighteenth century 20-25 % of the English lived in towns, with over half of these in small centres of less than 5,000. Bristol had 50,000 inhabitants by 1750, Norwich, 36,000 and Newcastle 29,000. By 1800, Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester were the largest, with populations ranging from c. 75,000 to 90,000. The spa towns and county and cathedral towns attracted members of the court, the gentry and the professional classes. Oxford, in its role as major university town and early musical centre, was populated by only 8,000 in the mid eighteenth century, and 12,000 by its end, but nevertheless one skewed to the elites and professions; by the 1730s it had three distinct musical societies. Musical culture

and amateur traditions built on long-standing musical networks, while developing music clubs, subscription series and festivals, so that concerts became, by later in the eighteenth century, a nationwide pastime.



*Instruments of Time and Truth rehearsing in Oxford's Holywell Music Room for their 'Handel's Youthful Exuberance' concert in February 2020.*

Music clubs combined a mixture of public and private events; music festivals included sacred pieces performed in churches, and secular pieces in other venues, such as The College Hall in Hereford. Towns developed their own specialist concert venues - from the Holywell Music Room (above) in Oxford in 1742, and St. Cecilia Hall, Edinburgh in 1762, to the Music Hall, Liverpool in 1786, and St. Andrews Hall, Norwich in 1788. For the most part music was publicly performed in commercial premises devoted to sociability and entertainment - inns, assembly rooms, theatres, the new pleasure gardens such as those in Bath, Norwich, Bristol, Birmingham and Newcastle.

There was a great deal of amateur composition and performance. Rich connections between popular and elite musical culture during the early modern period continued, although specific types of music making were increasingly associated with politeness and gentility. Music clubs and subscription series were expensive. James Harris's subscription concerts in Salisbury, followed by John Marsh in Canterbury then Chichester. The Salisbury series cost the concert-goer two guineas a year; the Chichester series attracted 150 subscribers a year.

By the 1740s there were 53 oratorio subscription concerts; another 43 subscription concerts, and 45 concert series advertised. Geminiani's subscription series at Hickford's in 1731/2 cost 4 guineas for a 20-concert series; Handel's 18 concert oratorio series in 1743 cost 6 guineas. Only the wealthy elite could afford to attend regularly at these prices. Many more did attend occasional concerts; tickets for professional-level concerts might be had for between 5s. and 10s.6d, the equivalent today of paying c.£75 to £160. And there was a great diversity of events to attend. Between 1672 and 1749 there were over 4,300 musical events advertised in the London press; as many were also advertised in the period from 1750 to the end of the century. By the end of the century large audiences were attending the festivals; 970 saw Haydn's Creation at the 1800 Salisbury Festival.

While the cost of music listening could be high, domestic music-making needed not be. Many instruments could be had quite cheaply – a violincello for £5, violins for £2 to £3, an oboe for less than £2. But harpsichords and pianos did cost a lot, c. £35-50 guineas in the mid 18thC, and organs were very expensive. Organs were only just being replaced in the churches from the mid eighteenth century onwards, after their removal during the Commonwealth a hundred years prior. John Marsh of Chichester, not only a great impresario of concerts and orchestras, but an active composer and amateur musician, travelled about England playing on newly installed church organs.



*Senisino alongside Francesca Cuzzoni and Gaetano Berenstadt in a production of Handel's Flavió*

Fees for professional musicians ranged widely from £30 to £100 a year during the 1720s for members of the orchestra, and wind and brass instrumentalists could

be recruited for particular series or events from the many military bands quartered about the country with their regiments. But the well-funded Royal Academy's lead singers were highly paid; a famed castrato like Senisino (pictured above) could claim £1500, and the soprano Margherita Durastanti £1100. Handel's salary as music director was £700.

### **The Charities and Empire**

A key platform for developing English musical culture during the early to mid-eighteenth century were the charities: hospitals, almshouses, schools and orphanages. The Foundling Hospital, established in 1742, particularly became associated with the modish music set. Handel became closely involved in the fundraising, and also found it in a new venue for benefit concerts. An audience of 1,000, including the Prince and Princess of Wales attended his benefit concert in 1749 in aid of the completion of the Chapel; he held the first benefit concert of *Messiah* there in 1750, donated an organ, and became a Governor. He held annual concerts of *Messiah* after this, raising £7,000 overall. Handel's close musical associates, Charles Jennens (1700-1773), *Messiah*'s librettist John Christopher Smith, Handel's secretary and copyist and first organist at the Foundling Hospital, and the tenor John Beard (1717-1791) were all closely involved in the project.

The association between music and the charities also takes us back to the inequalities, diversity and sources of income in London as Europe's great imperial city. There were approximately 10,000 people identified as black in eighteenth-century London. What was their part in the musical history of this city of empire? Here, as with the lives of so many ordinary people from the eighteenth-century, we know very little. A number came to London as slaves and became servants; some were well-educated, including in music. The most famous case is that of Ignatius Sancho (1729-1780), former slave turned composer, musician, and writer, after also earning his living as a grocer.



*Ignatius Sancho; George Bridgetower*

George Polgreen Bridgetower (1778-1860), came to London from Europe; he played at the Bristol Assembly Rooms in late 1789 and early 1790 as a prodigy, then across the London theatres during the next ten years. His musical education was fostered by the Prince Regent, and he went on to develop a European as well as British concert career. He holds enduring fame as the former dedicatee of the Beethoven Kreutzer sonata. Joseph Antonio Emedy (1775-1835), a former Portuguese slave, became a virtuoso violinist and composer, eventually becoming the leader of the Truro Philharmonic Orchestra. On a wider scale there is evidence of black soldiers in the military regiments stationed around the country, and some of these may well have been part of the military bands whose members also took part in wider orchestral concerts. But whatever their origin, our knowledge remains limited on who so many of eighteenth-century Britain's musicians were.

### **Handel, benefactors and the Royal African Company**

Many of the benefactors of the charities along with the elite followers of the charity benefit concerts had grown rich on Britain's new trade and imperial wealth. A number of the original investors in the Royal Academy of Music were also shareholders in the Royal African Company and the South Sea Company (1711-1853). Both of these companies traded in slaves, though the Royal African Company ceased to do so in 1731, turning its activities to ivory and gold in the hope of clawing back from the brink of insolvency. Handel himself held shares in the Royal African Company in May, 1740 (he was paid in them), but continued to hold South Sea annuities as a holding place for transfers of fees and salary between 1723 and 1732. He was not alone; a number of the original subscribers to/investors in the Royal Academy of Music (1719-27) held shares in the Royal African Company.

There is a legacy in the imperial context of British musical culture, for Handel's most famous manuscripts were held by two families that had owned large plantations in Barbados and Antigua. The manuscripts of the Granville family are now held by the British Library. The first performing score of Messiah, once owned by the Ottley family is now in the Bodleian Library. We are now learning just how much of Britain's economic and social infrastructure was funded by the profits of slavery and compensation for abolition; so too was its cultural infrastructure, including scores and musical instruments. Wealthy families engaged in the slave trade and used this financial capital to build up cultural capital in the musical culture of the day, hiring musicians, purchasing manuscripts and scores, and musical instruments and funding concerts.

London as a European musical metropolis was also the centre of a rapidly growing British economy, now embedding itself in a wider global empire. It

attracted musicians, audiences, benefactors and patrons from well beyond its traditional European networks. This was not just the story of one metropolis, for Britain's distinctively urban profile ensured the wide dispersal of a rich musical culture of performers and concert goers. With wealth partially funded by empire, the British commercialised their culture, importing, adapting and developing a great variety of musical forms and staging these in many new venues. Increasingly audiences came not just from the elites, but from many in the middle classes. This commercial and amateur musical culture was not just London's achievement, but was widespread across the country.

### **Further Reading:**

Maxine Berg, *Luxury and Pleasure in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Oxford, 2005).

Helen Berry, *The Castrato and his Wife* (Oxford, 2011).

Helen Berry, 'Gender, Sexuality and the Consumption of Musical Culture in Eighteenth-Century London', in S. Hindle, A. Shepard and J. Walter, eds., *Remaking English Society: Social Relations and Social Change in Early Modern England* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, 2013).

Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance: Culture and Society in the Provincial Town 1660-1770* (Oxford, 1989).

Peter Borsay, 'Concert Topography and Provincial Towns in Eighteenth-Century England', in Susan Wollenberg and Simon McVeigh, eds., *Concert Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Farnham, Surrey, 2004).

John Brewer, 'Culture as a Commodity; 1660-1800', in Anne Bermingham & John Brewer, eds., *The Consumption of Culture 1600-1800* (London, 1995).

John Brewer, *The Pleasures of the Imagination: English Culture in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 1997).

Catherine Harbor, 'The Marketing of Concerts in London 1672–1749', *Journal of Historical Research in Marketing*, July, 2020.

Ellen T. Harris, "'Master of the Orchestra with a Sallary": Handel at the Bank of England', in *Music and Letters*, 101, 2020.

Douglas Hay and Nicholas Rogers, *Eighteenth-Century English Society* (Oxford, 1997)

David Hunter, 'Handel Manuscripts and the Profits of Slavery: the Granville Collection at the British Library and the First Performing Score of Messiah Reconsidered', *Notes* (December, 2019), pp. 27-37.

H.D. Johnstone, "Handel's London - British Musicians and London Concert Life", in D. Burrows, (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Handel*, (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 64-77.

Paul Langford, *A Polite and Commercial People. England 1727-1783* (Oxford, 1989)

Simon McVeigh *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn*, (Cambridge, 1993).

Simon McVeigh, Calendar of London Concerts 1750–1800, Goldsmiths, University of London, <http://research.gold.ac.uk/10342/> (accessed 29 July, 2020).

Christopher Marsh, *Music and Society in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2010).

Walvin, James, 'Ignatius Sancho: The Man and His Times' in Reyahn King (ed.). *Ignatius Sancho: An African Man of Letters* (London, National Portrait Gallery, 1997)

Susan Wollenberg, *Music at Oxford in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries*, (Oxford, 2001).

Susan Wollenberg and Simon McVeigh, eds., *Concert Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, (Farnham, Surrey, 2004).

Maxine Berg,

July, 2020