

Conference 'Competitions in Nineteenth-Century Music Culture'

28./29.06.2019

University of Cologne

Catch and Glee Club prizes in the long nineteenth century: nurturing a 'national music'

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon, and thank you very much indeed for inviting me to come and present at this conference. It's my first trip to the European mainland in this strange period between the date we thought the UK might be leaving the union, and the date many now hope will be further delayed, again and again, until all those who voted for Brexit have died, either of old age or boredom and frustration. So it's been very nice to feel welcome. And that's all I'm going to say about Brexit for at least another two minutes.

Thanks also for speaking English all the time; my German would not have survived two minutes in this environment.

I'm here to talk about the prizes which were awarded for new compositions in England in a few very particular genres of vocal music in the century between about 1760 and 1860. I'm talking about the canon [[click for these three images](#)], the catch, and the glee.

At the time, they were fantastically popular; in fact, one of them had been a feature of British social life for centuries before this. But when you try and talk about them today, you have to explain what they were; they have all but disappeared from our cultural landscape now, at least by the names we used to use.

I'll come to the glee later. The canon and the catch work in exactly the same way, and the word we use nowadays to describe this form is 'round'. The only difference between a canon and a catch is that a 'canon' always had a sacred text. But they all have the same structure: a single melody line, in three, four or occasionally more phrases, each using the same harmonic basis so every phrase harmonises with all the others. It's easier to play you one than to explain it: here it is [[click to play *Now We Are Met*](#)].

Now the context of this music is terribly important. It's probably obvious that this is a cheerful little song, and, equally obviously, it encourages drinking along with it. This is typical; the environment in which this music expected to find itself was a friendly, social sort of place: someone's house, or the tavern, or pub [[click for *Dighton image*](#)]. Wherever you were, sobriety was unthinkable. And the jollity was reflected in the words of catches as well as the music: you heard the lines answering each other in that short example, but it could get a lot cleverer than that—and much sillier. And, given the alcohol-fuelled conviviality, and the all-male company, it won't surprise you to know that it could get quite rude, too. We use the French term *double-entendre* to describe this sort of thing, but there are times when the *entendre* isn't very *double*, at all. But perhaps the two key points to bear in mind are, one, that this is an essentially participatory genre—catches were never intended to be listened to—and, two, that this sort of music had been a feature of British life since at least the 13th century (the earliest one we have is *Sumer is Icumen In*). So, in short, we were very fond of this little genre, and in the eighteenth century several very serious—and perfectly polite—composers took it very seriously indeed. More of this shortly.

Now listen to this [[click to play *Discord*](#)].

That's a glee, and it should be perfectly obvious that this is more serious matter. In fact, I think it's one of the best ever, and it was written by a man who became the acknowledged master of the genre: Samuel Webbe. Here he is, in 1772, setting to music a message as relevant today as it was then: a warning that discord, or disagreement, can grow and fester until it finally erupts into conflict. Happily, peace breaks out at the end of this piece. That's typical; glees almost always finish on a more cheerful note, however miserable they are to start with. And the hopeful message is certainly what we need today...

And perhaps that cheerfulness reflects the fact that, as with the catch, this was essentially a sociable music. Not everyone might be able to sing them—they were usually left to the more musically able members of the company—but they shared the performance space with the catch, as this companion piece to the earlier image shows [[click for Dighton images](#)]. And where the catch singers are represented as slightly chaotic—the dog looks as if it’s about to wreak havoc with the table-cloth—the glee singers are rather more organised.

I don’t know if you noticed, but that glee has a proud boast for a heading [[click for image](#)]. Here at last we encounter the prizes which are the subject of this paper. Note that no further detail is required; it’s assumed that potential purchasers will be perfectly well aware of the strength of this recommendation. There was no need, even, to explain who awarded the prize.

There is now, of course. So it’s time to explain that the kind of informal gatherings we’ve seen depicted in these two charming prints by Robert Dighton evolved, in the late 18th century, into rather more formalised clubs and societies. This happened across the land, in all fields of human endeavour, but it’s worth noting that although this outburst of cultural activity does suggest a seriousness of intent, the association of music with food and plentiful drink remained constant [[click for Lyric Repository title page image](#)]. This is the frontispiece illustration for an entirely serious volume of lyric poetry; the words of the songs, catches, and glees were deemed worthy of note in many such volumes. Here, though, I’m pointing out that such seriousness goes happily alongside a picture of cheerful sociability by one of the great cartoonists of the day, Thomas Rowlandson.

The club which gave out those prizes was the London Noblemen and Gentlemen’s Catch Club [[click for Warren title page image](#)]. Although it wasn’t the first such society, it became the model for countless others, both in the capital and in the provinces up and down the country. There has always been, in English society, a tendency to mimic our social superiors.

It’s odd - we’ve always known what they were like. Here’s a brief digression into political satire. James Gillray drew this—“The Rt Hon’ble catch singers”—in 1783 [[click for pic](#)]. It depicts Lord North sitting at a table with Charles James Fox. I won’t bore you with the historical detail, but it’s obvious that Gillray’s depiction of these two politicians is not intended to flatter, and it’s worth noting that the association with catch singing was meant to tarnish their reputation still further; this music really did not have a very good image.

If I have the time, a bit about Boris Johnson, and [[click for pic](#)] the Steve Bell cartoon...

Back to the eighteenth century. So if London had a posh Catch Club, everywhere else wanted one too.

There is a huge clue in the title as to the social status of this society: of the nine men who founded it in 1761 [[click for Minutes page image](#)], eight were drawn from the very highest levels of London society. Aristocrats and military men, their intentions were elitist from the start. Other sociable singing clubs blossomed and withered in the decades around this one but it’s probably true to say that only this lot had the money to award the generous prizes they started handing out in 1762, and continued to do so for some 30 years. Gold medals [[click for pic](#)], to the value of ten guineas each—very roughly 1,000 pounds or euros, now, in today’s money—were given: one each for the best catch, canon and glee in English, and another for one of each in any other language. Eventually, this evolved into four prizes: one medal each for the best ‘serious’ glee, the best ‘cheerful’ glee, and the best catch, and canon. In the history of 18th- and 19th-century British music, this represents one of the most significant examples of arts subsidy.

Nothing like this comes out of the blue; such an initiative is always in response to some perceived need, or threat. So we have to ask why; what prompted this considerable investment in new composition? One of the other great glee composers of Samuel Webbe’s slightly later generation was John Wall Callcott (whose grandson, by the way, John Callcott Horsley, invented the Christmas card!) and he noted in an essay, now

kept in the British Library [\[click for pic\]](#), that the whole point was to revive the "neglected music" of the period of the Elizabethan madrigal. Do you catch the faint whiff of nostalgia, there? A wistful invocation of former glories? I'll come back to that. Callcott also said the Club wanted "to encourage the efforts of rising talents". And although the tone of the Club's pronouncements is not overtly nationalistic at this stage, it's fairly obvious that those rising talents were English. Yes, they did translate the early advertisements into French and Italian (why not German and Spanish, I wonder, especially given the marvellous tradition of male-voice singing here...) for European periodicals, but it wasn't long before this patronage was clearly identified with a nurturing of a very English form.

This backward-looking aesthetic probably had something to do with the musical characteristics of the glee, which were—and remained—deeply conservative. The best of the glee composers were perfectly capable of writing counterpoint, and, when the genre had finally settled into something that everyone would recognise, it turned out to be, as you've heard, an unaccompanied piece usually for three, four or five voices (occasionally more) in a sectional structure which, as I've said, almost always ended in a cheerful triple-time but might well have had a more learned section in the middle. Here's the bit from *Discord* to make that point [\[click for audio\]](#).

Now this sort of thing chimed with the antiquarian inclinations of the times—many of these composers were scholars and musicologists in their own right—but this hankering after former glories sounds awfully familiar now. I'm not arguing that it was *just* a nostalgic exercise. Consider this extract from the Preface to a book of songs—*The Essex Harmony*—published in 1777 [\[click for TP image\]](#):

There are likewise several other catch-clubs held in London, also at Oxford, &c. but it would be giving both myself and readers too much trouble to give a succinct account of them all, as there are a great many others in several parts of this kingdom, some held weekly, some once a fortnight, and some of them once a month, amongst many country choirs, &c., and [\[click for this text\]](#) in some places are given gratis, by gentlemen, a silver cup, &c. to be sung for by country choirs, on holidays, at some inn, or public house; and in many places, [\[click for this text\]](#) publicans themselves have put up gold rings, &c., to be sung for in like manner; which, provided this was more encouraged and pursued, would not only [\[click for this text\]](#) prevent the many accidents, mischiefs, and other bad consequences, generally attending those diversions of heroism, cudgelling, football playing, &c., but would be a means of encouraging the practice of one of the greatest of sciences; and what can be more agreeable or commendable for country choirs, than to meet once a week, fortnight, or month, and thereby entertain themselves and friends with such [\[click for this text\]](#) harmonious and inoffensive mirth; which may not only introduce peace and tranquillity in a neighbourhood, but the practising of part-songs and catches will be a means of greatly improving several country choirs in their knowledge of music...

By the way, I know I seem to be spending a lot of time in the late 18th century, but this prize-giving culture persisted well into the 19th. I've seen notes recording the fact that such-and-such a piece won a prize as late as 1875.

So there was a moral and social imperative, too, to this mimetic behaviour, with which we might have every sympathy today. But a nationalistic impulse certainly played its part, and here, as ever, the English may have been dimly aware that they had a bit of a problem. Only a few decades before the Catch Club met, the great historian Edward Gibbon [\[click for image\]](#), writing his massive "Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire", observed that the English (and this bit has to talk about the English, because the Romans never did defeat the Scots) were easy to conquer because they (the various tribes of "English" people at the time) had plenty of inclination to fight and very little to unite. Another historian – of our own time, the most excellent Linda Colley – characterises the century during which Gibbon was writing as the period in which we defined ourselves as a nation—largely by what we were *not*. [\[click for X & ✓\]](#) We were *not* French, we were *not*

Catholic, we were *not really* serious about democracy... and that's pretty much it. What we *were* was then, and remains now, a much more contested and divisive question. [\[click for blank slide\]](#)

Musically speaking, it seems we were feeling somewhat swamped by foreign influences. These were partly responsible for the poor reputation under which music and musicians laboured. Lord Chesterfield's well-known advice to his son—in a letter written in April, 1749, when Philip was in Venice—has this to say about music in general:

As you are now in a musical country, where singing, fiddling, and piping, are not only the common topics of conversation, but almost the principal objects of attention, I cannot help cautioning you against giving in to those *illiberal* pleasures to the degree that most of your countrymen do, when they travel in Italy. If you love music, hear it; go to operas, concerts, and pay fiddlers to play to you; but I insist upon your neither piping nor fiddling yourself. [\[click for text\]](#) It puts a gentleman in a very frivolous, contemptible light; brings him into a great deal of bad company; and takes up a great deal of time, which might be much better employed. Few things would mortify me more, than to see you bearing a part in a concert, with a fiddle under your chin, or a pipe in your mouth. (Letter 68)

The caricaturists weighed in, of course, giving the impression that our aristocratic homes had been invaded by French dancing-masters and our concert-halls by Italian fiddlers [\[click for image\]](#); here's one by Cruikshank which gives you the sense of the thing. There's no doubt in all this that it was felt to be a friendly invasion, but that doesn't alter the fact that the Prize Medal competition clearly suggests that our native music needed some support. In fact, some writing suggests that attitudes later hardened, as witness one grudgingly approving review of a new publication of glees by Bishop in 1833. This review is notable for more than its appraisal of Bishop's music: its disappointed tone relating to Bishop's Italian schooling and to his favoured cultural medium—the stage—make clear that on both counts he has mildly betrayed his heritage:

The glee is our national music, is indigenous to these isles, and a beautiful species of composition however viewed. [...] Mr. Bishop, though he pursued his professional duties under an *Italian* master, and has devoted his life chiefly to the *theatre*, has cultivated what in an English musician may almost be called a natural talent for glee-writing.¹

I'm reminded of Tobias' comments earlier today about the risk-taking in some competitions; this sort of criticism clearly deters that.

So if the intention was to nurture a national music, did it work? What, in the thirty years over which over 100 prize medals were awarded, did the members of the Catch Club get for their money?

Well, in terms of quantity: yes, they got lots of glees and catches. For years, the Secretary of the Club, Thomas Warren, published an anthology of prize winners and others, which gives us some clue; there are 32 of these volumes [\[click for image of Warren TP again\]](#). Of course, many, many more were submitted than actually won, and while some of it was of high quality, it has to be admitted that much of it wasn't. The best summary comes from David Johnson, in *The Musical Times* of 1979: "A dip into any glee collection," he says, "will quickly provide examples of trite lyrics and part writing whose textbook correctness is matched only by its fear of modulation." I'm afraid he's right.

But there's another question we should probably try to answer: given that this music is a resolutely vocal genre—idiosyncratically, since continental Europe was enthusiastically embracing instrumental genres—what were the songs *about*? If it's English music which is being celebrated here, were they, for example, particularly

1. (1833, 148)

patriotic?

The answer is, fortunately not, really, because if most of the music is pretty poor stuff, it's absolutely at its worst when it's patriotic. There are various toasts to the King, songs in praise of the British Navy, local efforts celebrating the men of whatever part of the country you were living in, but hardly any of it is worth a second glance. The best of the bunch, predictably, is Purcell's "Fairest Isle".

So what is it about, then? Well, mostly, drinking, courtship, and sex, all filtered through a very masculine aesthetic. Which may well have been why later generations dismissed it, largely: the music critic Edward Holmes, writing in 1852, described it with withering scorn [[click for text](#)]:

"As the manufacturer of "the sweetest song of the season" still consults the sentimental thermometer when he would delight the schoolgirls, so did the glee composer of yore, tasting the solid fruits of popularity, too often put aside the nobler objects of ambition, to consider what would be acceptable to the many-headed crowd."

And he pronounced it dead, useful only for ear training and practice at unaccompanied part-singing.

For William Makepiece Thackeray, it's the drinking that's the problem. In his biography of George IV [[click for Gillray image](#)], he laments the future king's poor company, and blames singing [[click for text](#)]:

It was an unlucky thing for this doomed one, that, besides being lovely, so that women were fascinated by him; and heir to the throne, so that everyone flattered him; he should have a beautiful voice, which led him directly in the way of drink

For Thackeray, the Prince's fate was inevitable, given the ubiquity of such temptation [[click for text](#)]: "Singing after dinner and supper was the universal fashion of the day. You may fancy all England sounding with choruses, some ribald, some harmless, but all occasioning the consumption of a prodigious deal of fermented liquor."

Looking back over this paper, I'm struck with the thought that if the Catch Club's intention was—at least in part—to assert a national identity through music, then, yes, it probably succeeded, up to a point, but the result is not particularly flattering. For a while. Social and cultural realities eventually set limits on the enterprise: the increasingly bourgeois concert-going public preferred the more inclusive concert-hall to the drinking club [[click for Gillray Anacreontics image](#)], and a more sober respectability, more respectful of finer sensibilities, held sway in Victorian Britain. So at this distance it looks more like a rather incoherent nationalistic spasm than a lasting statement. Let's hope Brexit turns out to be just that. Thank you for listening [[click for image](#)].

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