Durham Paper

Good morning, everyone. I think the literary tone for this paper is nicely set by the death of Lawrence Sterne. It's appropriate: there's quite a bit of retrospection in this paper, and this is Sterne mediated by a 19th-century writer. In *The English Humourists* William Makepiece Thackeray reports Sterne's death as follows: "…having come back to his lodgings in Bond Street, eager as ever for praise and pleasure; … death at length seized the feeble wretch, and, on the 18th of March, 1768, that "bale of cadaverous goods", as he called his body, was consigned to Pluto."

I don't share Thackeray's all-too-evident disdain for Sterne, but for now I want to draw attention to that grim characterisation of the physical body – that 'bale of cadaverous goods' – which we use to transport our sentient selves. Sterne's wry, detached view of our corporeal form as a mere sack of offal is consonant with the attitude to our mortality found in a number of the pieces of music I'm going to refer to, or at least with the intellectual milieu which received them, and it helps explain why such apparently depressing subjects as loss, grief and death figure rather more frequently than we might expect in a repertoire which was - infamously - intended for convivial company, be it in the context of an informal gathering (this is putting it charitably) at a dinner, or in a tavern; or in the more serious musical environment of a catch or glee club evening such as the one shown here – the Canterbury Catch Club in full swing in 1826. It's a repertoire, I would argue, which articulates in song *Tristram Shandy*'s knowing, self-referential, cheerfully self-defeating perspective on the story of a life.

That detachment is depicted quite literally in one early glee by Thomas Arne [click]. If Sterne sets the literary tone, *The Emperor Adrian, Dying, to his Soul*, sets the musical tone for us here. It's a soliloquy: "Poor little flutt'ring thing," sings the Emperor… [click; excerpt, from b.5], and comes to no firm conclusion: "Thy pleasing vein, thy am'rous folly are all neglected, all forgot. And pensive, wav'ring melancholy thou dread'st and hop'st thou know'st

not what." Solemn. But I'm going to try to argue that this repertoire is a delightful – and for us, very recognisable – synthesis of Sterne's black humour with an appeal to our frail humanity which is entirely serious.

Context is important: we should recall that catches and glees were firmly associated with the exclusively male, fairly disreputable, and not at all serious, environment of alcoholic gatherings – of all classes [click]. RJS Stevens was horrified at the bibulous excesses of the gentry in this sort of gathering – he describes the songs sung at the *Je Ne Sais Quoi Club* (where the Prince Regent was permanent Chairman) as "disgusting, disgraceful, and horrible to hear." Thackeray noted of the Prince Regent: "It was an unlucky thing for this doomed one … [that] he should have a beautiful voice, which led him directly in the way of drink … Singing after dinner was the universal fashion of the day, occasioning the consumption of a prodigious deal of fermented liquor."

But from at least the end of the 17th century catches found a home in more genteel surroundings. William Hayes was Professor of Music at Oxford, and in his Preface to *Catches, Glees and Canons* he makes the case for the humble catch:

> I found [them] to be productive of the most desirable effects: viz. … Good Humour, Friendship and a Love of Harmony; not to mention how much [they] contributed to the improvement of the younger practitioners, enabling them to sing readily at sight… and this … by allurement, and the gratification of the pleasure they found in it themselves.

There is no doubt that the "allurement" of Hayes' catches owed much to their subject-matter, which span a remarkable range from the poignant epitaph to the satirical story. The epitaph often brings out the best of the English talent for word-play, embracing a vocabulary seldom elevated in song. Above the manuscript of *On the Death of Wells*, a dedication tells us that Wells had been Master of the Bear-Garden; this explains the poignant

line “Ye butchers, weep, for you, no doubt, are grievers/And sound his loss with marrow-bones and cleavers”. Hayes’ setting of this pithy text is concise, but expansive in its melodic treatment, and the Neapolitan moment is an effective depiction of dogs howling. I forgot to import the music for this and the next one, but you can take a look in the book afterwards if you like; here’s the Hayes [click; excerpt].

A second example extends the word-play into quite a conceit: Baildon’s *Epitaph on a Blacksmith* employs a number of metaphors to drive home (no pun intended) the point that life will be extinguished eventually:

> *My sledge and hammer lie reclin'd, my bellows too have lost their wind,*
>
> *My fire's extinct, my forge decay'd, and in the dust my vice is laid,*
>
> *My coal is spent, my iron's gone, my nails are drove, my work is done.*

Here’s the last bit: wit cloaked in seriousness: [click; excerpt]

As in the case of the catch, **the glee** evolved in the late eighteenth century both culturally and musically. Its social development is most apparent in the clubs which proliferated in Britain’s towns and cities in the latter half of the century, such as the one at Canterbury. Clearly modelled on the London Noblemen and Gentlemen’s Catch Club, or ‘Nobs and Gents’, they articulated their social and cultural aspirations in the rules and regulations which, amongst other things, retained the distinction between full members and the musicians of lower social status whom they had to employ as ‘honorary members’ to perform for them. This in itself is a clue to one important aspect of the glee; it required trained musicianship and vocal technique. This is music which expected an audience.

It is a quintessentially English genre, deliberately eschewing the grander scale of the symphonic tradition. Emanuel Rubin characterises this as a very English “... left turn when the rest of the parade had turned right.” Vaughan Williams put it more kindly in 1914, describing the glee as “[an] exclusively

English art [form] - … small in scope, and not of heroic build." Here, he thinks, "the English character found its true utterance; directly it went further it began to lose itself."

The glee's musical antecedents were the madrigals of the sixteenth century, but it came to be characterised by a texture in which counterpoint is less common, and by structures which make frequent use of short contrasting sections, always – and crucially – in response to the text. The glee's subject-matter ranged far more widely than that of its ancestor, the madrigal, and its cousin the catch. Whilst the majority of the repertoire encourages alcohol-fuelled conviviality, those pieces sit cheek by bucolic jowl with texts taking war, philosophy, politics, economics, utterly idiotic slapstick comedy, and, yes, death and grief for their inspiration. Not only does the genre expect an audience; it expects that audience to take it seriously, and it beguiles us into doing so with a cheerfully indiscriminate combination of wit which may stoop very low and high seriousness.

What are we to make of such a union? Perhaps our musical forbears knew, as Hazlitt points out, that "wit is the salt of conversation, not the food." It would be a tedious genre indeed if it were trying, incessantly, to be funny – in the same lecture[1] Hazlitt makes the point that "an affectation of wit by degrees hardens the heart, and spoils good company and good manners." – and this was an age in which manners mattered. The glee was anxious to appeal to our taste and judgement as well as our senses.

A fine example [click] is John Stafford Smith's setting of the song *Sleep, Poor Youth* from Thomas D'Urfey's 1694 adaptation of Cervantes' classic, *The Comical History of Don Quixote*. The song appears in Act 2, Scene 2, at a point which is far from comical: the young Chrysostom is being laid to rest, and young maidens sing this 'Dirge' to accompany the burial. Death, says the song, has at least spared this young man any more of the cares of this mortal life. The sentiment is exactly that of one of Shakespeare's best-known

[1] *On Wit and Humour*, 1818

songs: *Fear No More the Heat o' the Sun* from Act IV, Scene 2 of *Cymbeline* (which D'Urfey had also adapted some years previously), in which the heroine, Imogen (disguised as a boy), is believed expired thanks to one of those popular Elizabethan sleeping-draughts which mimic death.

Smith, coming to the text about a century later, sets it with genuine expressive power, beginning with a slow section treating the first half of the first verse with artless simplicity [click; excerpt]. Later, textural variety becomes more important: the first appearance of "Wars that do fatal storms disperse, far from thy happy mansions keep" is set for the upper three voices only, and this leads into a more dramatic treatment of the following line. Despite their angular, staccato character, these "earthquakes [shaking] the universe" will fail to rock the poor youth into any more sound a sleep than his present state; brace yourselves [click; excerpt]. The final section sees a return to the slow triple time of the start, for an exquisitely peaceful ending: "Past is the fear of future doubt,/The sun is from the dial gone", sing the shepherd and shepherdess, ending with profound restraint [click; excerpt].

Perhaps this theatre piece reminds us that we should not be surprised at the juxtaposition of melancholy with comedy. Theatre has always known that the sting of bittersweetness intensifies the pleasure; how much funnier are the four weddings, thanks to the funeral? [Click] Henry Bishop, that great man of the theatre, won the Manchester Glee Club prize in 1832 for his glee *Where Shall We Make Her Grave?*, poetry by Dorothea Browne Heman. I only have time here to note the recurrence of the theme of death as a release from ills (that wry detachment again): "Harsh, harsh was the world to her; now may sleep minister balm for each ill ..." and the fact that a warm E flat major seems to be a popular key for this sort of musing – the Stafford Smith, and Pearsall's much later *Lay a Garland*. In the relative minor, this piece [Click] by Stephen Paxton, *Sonnet Spoken in the Character of Werther*, is a suitably mournful contribution to this brief overview of musical grief. I'm no expert on Werther, but I showed this to David Owen Norris recently and he wondered whether it might be one of the first manifestations of the

Werther personality cult. Again, no recording, but you can see the pent-up emotion in the opening expostulation, the opportunity for word-painting we saw in the Arne, and the declamatory outbursts – “Yes!” – as Werther looks forward to Charlotte’s weeping over his grave. But if the world seems a sad place, well, the repertoire as a whole is quick to remain the young Werther - and us - that, in the words of Clive Sansom's Innkeeper's Wife, "wine and music will blunt the truth of it."

Because this repertoire knows we are mortal. Confronted with that, it seems to be telling us, the only thing worth taking seriously is the blank fact that there is nothing worth taking seriously. It’s a strain of English thinking which for most of us owes much to Shakespeare – “our little life is rounded with a sleep”, Prospero reminds his audience – us – in Act 4 of *The Tempest*. The best writers have known this, and that includes the poets to whom the glee composers turned in this literate age - and the composer's themselves, literate men as they were. Lawrence Sterne knew it, and insists, exuberantly, on letting us know that he knew it, much to the annoyance of Thackeray. John Kenneth Galbraith levels the same charge at Trollope, who put himself firmly in that literary lineage by referencing *Tristram Shandy* with the venal Mr Slope. Other 19th-century writers forgot it, I think. Nowadays, we think we discovered it; we call it postmodernism, and thus pigeon-hole it comfortably. It tells us something important: that whether our efforts are rewarded or not – and that’s if we’re spared long enough to see their fruition – the folly of the farce will soon be done. Our glass will be run. Our sands will be sunk. Mine are. Thank you for your kind attention.