

# Bourgeois self-representation: a methodological case-study in musical iconography

## Introduction

### Opening slide: CC print

Ladies and gentlemen, good afternoon, thank you all for coming, and from me, in my turn, a particular thanks to the conference organisers for inviting me to make what is my first visit to visit China. I only got here at 3.00 yesterday morning, and I was treated yesterday evening to some marvellous Chinese hospitality, so I'm jet-lagged and exhausted and I'm having a wonderful time. I'm very grateful.

My subject for the next 20 minutes or so looks at a fascinating little bit of the history of my home town of Canterbury. Specifically, I'd like to introduce you to the Canterbury Catch Club: here they are, immortalised in a splendid lithograph dating from 1826. You may be wondering why you are looking at a group of 19<sup>th</sup>-century English gentlemen in a Conference on Chinese art and trans-cultural exchanges. Well, I urge you to note the use of the word "methodology" in my title: I pitched this paper as an example of how we can use other sources to scrutinise an image. And if you think, as I do, that Lars Kristensen and several others did a brilliant job of that yesterday, then I hope you can sit back and enjoy the paper as a cultural detour, albeit a little off-piste. It does have some actual music in it, so I hope you stay interested.

A sense of time and place is important: here [\[click\]](#) is a map of England, from about 1800, and here [\[click\]](#) in the bottom south-east corner of our tiny island, about 60 miles from London [\[click\]](#), is Canterbury [\[click for white circle\]](#). These days, you'll

fly into London, but then you sailed to Dover [\[click for white circle\]](#) and took a coach. Canterbury would have been on the way: here [\[click\]](#) is a map of the city at about that time: a small provincial city of about 9,000 souls whose cathedral happened to be the centre of Anglican Christendom. William Gostling's *Walk Around the City of Canterbury* in 1779 describes it thus [\[click for Gostling North View\]](#): "It is seated in a pleasant valley, about a mile wide, between hills of moderate height, with fine springs rising from them." Edward Hasted's *History of Canterbury* (1801) finds the people just as pleasant: "Many gentlemen of fortune and genteel families reside in it, especially within the precincts of the cathedral." Around this time, Canterbury's economy revolved around agriculture, and hops [\[click for pics\]](#) were an important part of it. In 1778 the county of Kent grew over half the nation's hops. That many hops make a lot of beer [\[click\]](#). In 1800 the city boasted 100 pubs [\[click for pic of pub\]](#). What this tells you is that there was a healthy drinking culture. And drinking meant singing, as far as the English were concerned, for many hundreds of years. We'll come back to this.

The singing is helped considerably when you have the building we now call Canterbury Cathedral [\[click for aerial pic\]](#), which of course has always had a group of men and boys sing in the choir. The men, being keen singers, were, we know, very happy to carry on singing whilst drinking in the pub. There are quite a few pictures of this sort of activity - drinking and singing combined - and they aren't very flattering. This is one of the worst [\[click for pic\]](#): Gillray's "Anacreontics in Full Song" from 1801. There are common features to all these images: long clay pipes (including some broken on the floor); a chandelier; a portrait (this of Bacchus, to whom the Anacreontics appealed for their classical credibility in song); glasses and bottles; and hats hung on pegs on the walls. It's twenty to four in the morning. The

overall effect is chaotic. Note the various poses: slumber, slavering mouths agape, caterwauling, and short-sighted inspection of the one piece of music visible in the picture - this, presumably, the Anacreontic Song penned by John Stafford Smith, from which the caption across the top of the image is drawn: “Whilst snug in our Club Room we jovially twine / The Myrtle of Venus with Bacchus’ wine” - and I’m just going to listen to see if the translators sing this properly... Yes, if you think you recognise the tune, it really is the American national anthem. Here, we are led to conclude that the consumption of alcohol is the prime purpose of the gathering; the singing of anything, let alone the Club song, is relegated to a very minor role. The overall effect is clearly intended to convey a scene of thoroughly transgressive behaviour.

This particular picture may be the worst caricature of sociable singing, but it’s not the only one [\[click for pics\]](#) to suggest that singing goes hand-in-hand with excessive drinking: this was, quite simply, the terrible reputation it had. Perhaps this fact alone helps us to understand why, when we come to the Canterbury Catch Club print from the year 1826 [\[click for CC pic\]](#), we find that it is the very antithesis of all this. Formally constructed, with lines which radiate strength and gravitas, it paints a picture of a group of men (yes, all men) which can be trusted. But, now you know what some other pictures looked like, you have to ask: why should we trust this picture? It is, after all, a picture of a catch club.

Footnote number 1; [\[click for pic of \*Now We Are Met\*\]](#) apologies if you already know this: in case the term “catch” is unfamiliar to you, let me explain that it’s a musical genre which has been very well known to the English drinking classes - so, everyone - since at least the 16<sup>th</sup> century, if not earlier. The most famous use of the word is to

be found in Shakespeare, when, in *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 3, Sir Toby Belch greets the arrival of the Fool with a cheerful “Welcome, ass. Now let’s have a catch.” It is, quite simply, a round for grown-ups: this consists of one continuous melody whose constituent phrases (usually 3 or 4) harmonise with each other, thanks to the repeated harmonic sequence underpinning them. This means that one singer can start and be followed by others, each beginning as successive phrases are completed, thus creating instant harmony. We think the name originated from the Italian, *caccia*, since that’s a good description of what the voices do: they chase each other, round and round. Here is a short example [[click for audio of \*Now We Are Met\*](#)]. Now although the harmonic basis of a catch can get a bit more sophisticated than the few chords required in *Now We Are Met*, the adult content may reside not so much in its music as in its text: mainly (though not solely) thanks to Henry Purcell, the catch has long had a reputation for rude and offensive content: in 1795 one William Jackson described them as pieces of music which “when quartered, have three parts obscenity and one part music”.<sup>1</sup> So this was music ideally suited to the sort of company Sir Toby Belch keeps in *Twelfth Night*. At least, that’s what everybody thinks about the catch, and I don’t have time to show you that that’s not entirely fair. End of footnote.

By now you MUST be wondering why this picture [[click for CC print again](#)] shows a group of evidently civilised gentlemen listening to an orchestra - or not, as the case may be - when you now know that the name they have given to their club suggests very clearly that they have gathered to sing rude songs. There’s no sign of any

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<sup>1</sup> William Jackson, *Letters on Various Subjects: On Catches*, 3rd edn. (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), p. 61-71 in <<https://archive.org/details/thirtylettersonv00jack>> [accessed 8<sup>th</sup> Feb 2016].

singing here. So can we trust this picture? Is it any use as a piece of evidence about the music-making it claims to represent?

To decide, we need to scrutinise the sources - the picture itself, and the corroborative archives it comes with. This image turns out to be an excellent example of that process.

We can be certain of its provenance: date, artist, publisher and printer are given, and other records corroborate that information. Slightly mysteriously, it has, for some time, been accompanied by a hand-drawn sketch with typewritten names identifying 42 of the 120 figures in the picture [\[click\]](#). The only clue to its provenance I've found so far is in a cathedral magazine from 1943, but much of the information is corroborated by the Club's own records, by the Electoral Roll for 1826, [\[click\]](#) (this shows you who was qualified to vote) and by a city "Directory" (a list of people, places, businesses, etc., etc.) of just 12 years later, 1838 [\[click\]](#). It seems reasonable, then, to accept this strange document as good evidence. [\[click, to return to the print alone...\]](#)

And there are other records [\[click\]](#) of the Canterbury Catch Club: committee Minutes Books, concert records, accounts, various artefacts including portraits, and an astonishing archive of music (hundreds of volumes, thousands of pieces) give us a lot of evidence with which to scrutinise this print.

So we know that the club really did exist from 1779 to 1865, and organised weekly concerts throughout the winter months - 30 of them each season; we know many of the members; and the room shown, in which they met in the years 1779-1833, still

survives in the city. So do the portraits - a sizeable collection, including these two of St Cecilia and Corelli but also including one of Handel AND several more of members of the Club. Yes: club members had their portraits painted. Two of them [\[click\]](#) are on permanent display in the city library. That lovely lady in the foreground is my wife Sonia, brightening up the presentation considerably and helpfully giving a sense of scale to make clear that these were fairly serious paintings. The lower painting, [\[click\]](#) of the mild-mannered-looking gentleman with a violin, is a portrait of the musical director of the Club - yes, they were that serious about it - one Thomas Goodban. The other painting [\[click\]](#) is that picture of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music - and of the Canterbury Catch Club - seated at a keyboard instrument, with a couple of cherubs and a verse from Dryden hovering over her head, in a rather obvious invocation of classical models. What fine paintings! [\[click to go back to CC print\]](#)

But, with our suspicions aroused by the reputation of this music-making, we might use the Club's own records - along with others, some already mentioned - to interrogate this print. And when we do, our suspicions grow. The Club records show that the atmosphere would have been thick with the smoke [\[click\]](#) from all those pipes - the air pumps' miserable failure to clear the smog was a recurrent concern for about eighty years. Then there was the orchestra [\[click\]](#): local musicians accorded no more respect than musicians generally in the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, they were a perpetual irritation to the committee of local worthies running the Club. Women [\[click\]](#), we find, formed part of the audience and - quite exceptionally - were frequently heard performing (as singers, and better paid than the men) in this provincial gathering. In fact [\[click\]](#), vocal music actually comprised the larger part of the evening's formal concert, as we shall see. Meanwhile, there's

absolutely no clue here to the informal singing [\[click\]](#) of catches which we know went on after the concert until the early hours of the following morning.

Moreover, the music we *do* know about isn't exactly flattering. Thanks to the records, we know exactly what the club members heard in the 1825-1826 concert season. This [\[click\]](#) is the programme for the first of the season's concerts, transcribed from those records - here's the first page [\[click\]](#). It's a typical programme; the other 360+ records for the next 12 years detail a fairly substantial semi-formal concert each Wednesday evening [\[click to remove\]](#). Note that most of this programme is *vocal* music: only four instrumental items against solo songs, glees, a duet, and the National Anthem.

Footnote no. 2: the English glee, you should know, is an altogether more serious piece of music than its disreputable cousin, the catch: descendant of the madrigal and progenitor of the English part-song, it is an unaccompanied secular piece intended for three, four or five (very occasionally more) solo voices, the top voice usually being the distinctive, male, counter-tenor. This is one of the things which clearly suggests a strong connection with English cathedral music, and it's clear from Canterbury Cathedral records that most of the orchestral players in the Catch Club were lay clerks (gentlemen singers) in the cathedral choir. Note that the glee was not usually a piece intended for alcohol-fuelled participation; it expected an audience, and its subject-matter could be very serious indeed. Lots of songs about death, love, patriotism, setting some fine poetry. Though quite a few are about drinking, as you are about to hear. End of footnote.

It's instructive to scrutinise [\[click\]](#) the composers at the top of the Canterbury Catch Club hit parade in 1825-6, judging by the number of pieces played that season. Note the pre-eminence of Henry Bishop [\[click for arrows\]](#). His popularity far outstrips that of his two nearest rivals - the foremost glee composers of their day - John Wall Callcott and Samuel Webbe in the taste of the Canterbury Catch Club. Clearly, this is a composer to whom we should pay some attention.

Bishop was fantastically popular, and you may see why in a moment. The glee *Mynheer Van Dunk* [\[click\]](#) was performed no fewer than SIX times in the 1825-6 season. It's the opening chorus in George Colman's play-with-music-by-Bishop, *The Law of Java*. The play is rubbish, and you probably won't think much more highly of its music, but there is no denying Bishop's understanding of effective theatre: as the curtain opens on the Dutch soldiers, miserable, miles from home, thumping out their fake-traditional drinking song at the start of the show, things get off to a cracking start.<sup>2</sup> This piece, for a Catch Club audience, offered a tremendous opportunity (in the chorus) to join in. Here it is, specially recorded for this research by the present-day men of Canterbury Cathedral choir. Brace yourselves.

[\[Slide!!!!\]](#)

That music casts a little doubt on this picture, doesn't it?

The instrumental music in the Catch Club programmes has much the same character. By far the most popular orchestral item is the overture: 83 of them comprehensively outnumber the other 12 orchestral pieces played that season. The overture is

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<sup>2</sup> The source is the Catch Club archive copy, in Volume 40, p. 75, but it is easily obtainable at the BL.



perfect for a convivial concert such as the Catch Club, which never wanted to be too serious about anything: politics and religion were not to be discussed at a club night, and the music is emphatically light-hearted.

One way and another, the various pieces of evidence seem to put a bit of a dent in the veneer of serious, social sophistication this gathering is working so hard to depict. But after all that, perhaps the worst that might be said of this image is that it's economical with the truth - like all advertisements. This is hardly surprising. You don't want to publicise the smokiness of your room or the pay disputes with your musicians, who were, in any case, a typically disreputable lot. But we still have to ask: why might these worthy citizens feel any need to advertise themselves at all? In short, why is the Catch Club membership putting on its best behaviour?

I don't have time, here, to go into the question of class [\[click for Gillray beehive\]](#) in Britain in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To cut a long and rather bitter story short, you are looking at a group of people who were desperate to be accepted into the upper levels of British society. It was a hard-fought battle: we can see the tension in the Club committee's treatment of the Orchestra, who were, as far as the committee were concerned, merely paid artisans of a lower social class: throughout the Minutes Books, the committee has to grapple with thorny questions such as where the players might sit so they could watch when not performing (answer: at an unwanted table by the door of the Ladies' Room<sup>3</sup>), whether they should applaud other

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<sup>3</sup> Catch Club Minutes, Nov 15, 1841

performers from their positions in the orchestra (no, they shouldn't<sup>4</sup>), or whether a member of the Orchestra should be allowed to be a member of the Club (again, no<sup>5</sup>).

With all that in mind, it becomes clear that the performance at the back of the room in this print is not the most important one. The real performers are front and centre, as intended: a nascent middle class membership anxious to present a serious club both to themselves and to the outside world. Remember, they had their portraits painted: no expense was spared in strengthening that tenuous grip on social respectability. It's more than self-promotion: with political reform in the air, this print is a propaganda poster in the class war, every bit as manipulative in its intent as any carefully posed royal portrait [\[click for the monarchy pics\]](#) up to and including the present day. Here, with all the trappings of nineteenth-century culture clearly on display in this print, I suggest that we are looking at the Canterbury Catch Club giving a masterclass in the performance of class. Can we trust this picture, then? Well, yes and no: it shows what it wants you to see, sends the messages it wants you to receive. Look at us, it says; we are the future of our country and you can trust us with political power; we're not the French Revolution, we're British. Thanks to the other archive sources we've been able to use to interrogate this print, we can see that statement as more of an aspirational veneer than actual fact - to borrow Lars Kristensens' terminology, more prescriptive than descriptive, but I don't think we can blame them for that. Thank you for your kind attention.

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., Feb 8, 1841

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., Sept. 17, 1833