

# Open Research Online

---

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

## British Listeners c1780-1830

### Journal Item

How to cite:

Rowland, David (2020). British Listeners c1780-1830. *Nineteenth-Century Music Review*, 17(3) pp. 359–379.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© 2020 Cambridge University Press



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Accepted Manuscript

Link(s) to article on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.1017/S1479409819000545>

---

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's [data policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

---

[oro.open.ac.uk](http://oro.open.ac.uk)

## British Listeners c1780–1830

### Abstract

Evidence from diaries and correspondence shows how 44 individual listeners experienced music in Britain during the years c.1780 – 1830. The individuals were not united by social class, but each of them had the financial resources to gain access to operas, concerts and other performances enjoyed by the wealthiest in society.

Crucial to an understanding of these listeners' reactions to music is an evaluation of their personal documents which demonstrates how their evidence is shaped by genre, readership and a variety of cultural factors. Their descriptions of performances are used to show how London audiences, characterised in general by noise and commotion, contained a wide variety of listeners from those who appear to have attended largely for social reasons to those who reacted deeply to the music they heard. The evidence shows how those who listened intensely found greater satisfaction in more exclusive, private performances. It also shows how some listeners were deeply moved by what they heard, sometimes expressing their emotions through tears, in keeping with the culture of sensibility which thrived throughout the period.

Other themes that emerge from the evidence include the role played by reminiscence in intensifying listeners' listening, and the strong reactions that were often elicited by the experience of novelty or otherness. Some listeners are shown to have had different reactions to music according to the social context in which it was heard, or the repertoire that was performed.

### Author biography

David Rowland is Professor of Music, Principal Investigator for the Listening Experience Database project and former Dean of Arts at The Open University. For much of the last decade his research has focussed on listening history, with the assistance of two large Arts and Humanities Research Council grants. He is also the author of three books and numerous chapters and articles on the performance history of the piano and early keyboard instruments. He has edited the first scholarly edition of Clementi's correspondence, which provided the impetus for a much broader investigation of the London music trade during the French Revolution and Napoleonic wars, on which he has published extensively. David is also a performer on early keyboard instruments and Director of Music at Christ's College, Cambridge.

On the 24 February 1780 Thomas Twining (1735–1804), a village curate from Fordham near Colchester and grandson of the founder of the famous tea business, wrote from London to John Hey, his lifelong friend and former tutor at Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge:

we dined with [Joah] Bates one day, & heard Miss [Sarah] Harrop sing from tea-time till ten o'clock; snug & comfortable; no audience but the two Bates's, Mrs. Bates, & ourselves. One of the greatest musical treats I ever had. I had, as Sir Hugh Evans says, "great dispositions to cry"; nay, the tears actually came out, and Elmsall<sup>1</sup> said he should have cried if he had not seen how foolish I looked. She sung Pergolesi, Leo,

---

<sup>1</sup> Henry Elmsall was a friend of Twining's from his university days.

Hasse -- things I know, & that nobody sings. It gave me some faint idea of meeting one's departed friends in Heaven.<sup>2</sup>

The passage raises some issues about listening in the period. How often did listeners experience music this intensely? How many listeners did so? To what extent was their listening affected by the context in which it was performed? We might also ask how people's reactions to music were shaped by wider social and cultural forces, and what factors determined the way in which listeners recorded their experiences in personal documents.

These issues are addressed here using c.1250 pieces of evidence gathered from the diaries and letters of 21 male and 23 female listeners who wrote in detail about their listening experiences.<sup>3</sup> The fact that they did so sets them apart from many, if not most, of their peers, who rarely commented on their listening experiences. The evidence not only shows the impact of music on the personal lives of these 44 listeners, but it also gives us glimpses of reactions to music in wider society. This article is shaped by the themes that emerge from these personal accounts.

The individuals studied here were in some respects a disparate group, yet they shared some important characteristics. Their financial resources enabled them to consume a common musical culture in opera houses, theatres, concert halls, churches and the home. Their wealth placed them in that section of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century society that was privileged to enjoy music which, it has been argued, 'was consumed by the

---

<sup>2</sup> Ralph S. Walker, ed, *A Selection of Thomas Twining's Letters 1734-1804*, 2 vols, vol. 1 (Lewiston, Queenston, Lampeter: The Edwin Mellon Press, 1991): 178.

<sup>3</sup> These 1250 listening experiences do not include the multiple examples found in John Marsh's frequently-studied journals.

top 1 percent or 0.5 percent of the English population'.<sup>4</sup> Does this imply that these listeners belonged to the same social class? The question is pertinent, because recent studies of historical audiences have stressed the importance of class to collective listening behaviours.<sup>5</sup> But the answer is 'no'. Although the individuals studied here had the means to consume a common culture their backgrounds and occupations were far too varied to enable them to be categorised according to broad class descriptions. Some had acquired wealth through their own efforts, while others lived on the proceeds of inherited property: both characteristics applied to many. A good number of them moved in court circles and several were politicians or diplomats, but these features did not necessarily imply any particular background or personal wealth. Whatever their social origins, the references to music in their personal documents show that most of them were knowledgeable about the repertoire and performers they heard. As far as we can tell a good number performed on instruments, or sang from a music score, a factor that has been shown to affect the way that some individuals listened to music.<sup>6</sup>

It is well established in the modern literature that people listen in different ways and a number of authors have devised typologies to differentiate listeners' experiences.<sup>7</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Robert D. Hume, 'The Value of Music in Eighteenth-Century England: Incomes, Prices, Buying Power – and Some Problems in Cultural Economics' in *Huntingdon Library Quarterly* 77/4 (2014): 415. It was to be some time before admission prices were reduced sufficiently for a broad section of the population to be able to afford the culture to which these individuals had access.

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Katharine Ellis, 'Researching Audience Behaviours in Nineteenth-Century Paris: Who Cares if You Listen' and Charles Edward McGuire, 'Amateurs and Auditors: Listening to the British Musical Festival, 1810-1835', both in Christian Thorau and Hansjakob Ziemer, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Listening in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018 (online)), as two of the most recent examples.

<sup>6</sup> Ina Knoth, 'Musicking – Conversing – Writing: Towards a Cultural Perspective on Music Listening in 18th-century Britain' in Helen Barlow and David Rowland (eds), *The Experience of Listening to Music: Methodologies, Identities, Histories*, (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2019), <https://ledbooks.org/proceedings2019>

<sup>7</sup> The literature is extensive, but useful summaries of the areas of investigation are found in Simon Frith, 'Ways of Listening', in Helen Barlow and David Rowland, eds, *Listening to Music: People, Practices and Experiences* (Milton Keynes: The Open University, 2017), <http://ledbooks.org/proceedings2017> and Ruth Herbert, 'Modes of Music Listening and Modes of Subjectivity in Everyday Life', *Journal of Sonic Studies* 2/1 (May 2012), <http://journal.sonicstudies.org/vol02/nr01/a05>.

Accordingly, individuals are described as listening against a background of musical knowledge or ignorance, they may be attentive or inattentive, the music they hear may produce an emotional reaction, or it may leave them cold, and so on. A vocabulary has developed which describes listeners as 'distracted', 'superficial', 'absorbed', or some other adjective. In spite of their lack of precision, these terms can be useful when describing the kind of listening exhibited on a specific occasion. But they can also be misleading if they are used to characterise individuals by, for example, labelling them in general terms as 'absorbed' listeners when in fact they may listen in entirely different ways according to their mood, the company they share, the repertoire performed, or some other aspect of a performance's context. Terms such as these appear in this article from time to time, but they are neither relied on here to define listening too precisely, nor to categorise listeners definitively.

Despite the momentous social and economic changes that took place which deeply affected the country, the period c.1780-1830 has been chosen here because of the relative stability of its musical infrastructure. The capital's concert life illustrates the point. Although the traditional view has been that there was a dearth of concerts in London between Haydn's return to the continent in the mid-1790s and the foundation of the Philharmonic Society in 1813, it has more recently been established that concerts flourished throughout the period.<sup>8</sup> Admittedly, there were changes in the composition of audiences and programmes: London's West End audiences included an increasing proportion of attenders who demanded popular, vocally-based programming, pressures from the music profession led to the formation of the Philharmonic Society with its instrumentally-based programmes,

---

<sup>8</sup> Ian Taylor, *Music in London and the Myth of Decline. From Haydn to the Philharmonic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

and the upper classes tended to retreat into more exclusive concerts.<sup>9</sup> But these changes were relatively minor compared with developments in the 1830s and 1840s when several new features emerged in British musical life. These included the introduction of chamber concerts, solo recitals, concerts catering specifically for the less well-off along with the broadening of audiences' social composition facilitated by a reduction in ticket prices for some concerts,<sup>10</sup> and a new era of sensationalism epitomised in the concerts of Liszt, Paganini and Jullien. Taken together, these later changes were much more radical than those of the period c1780-1830, and they highlight the essential continuity of those earlier decades.

### *The evidence*

As already mentioned, the sources for this study are personal documents – correspondence and diaries – rather than writings intended to influence public opinion. They are ‘personal’ because they reflect the individual responses of their authors, but ‘personal’ in this context does not necessarily mean ‘private’. Commenting on the way in which correspondence circulated among family or wider groupings in the eighteenth century Clare Brant observes that:

The varied and often unpredictable circulation of letters confounds simple distinctions between public and private ... In the context of letter writing, ‘personal’ is useful in that it recognises the significance of letters to individuals and to

---

<sup>9</sup> Taylor, *Music in London* and Cyril Ehrlich, *First Philharmonic: a History of the Royal Philharmonic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>10</sup> Issues of patronage are discussed, for example, in McVeigh, *Concert Life*, Cyril Ehrlich, *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), William Weber, *Music and the Middle Classes: the Social Structure of Concert Life in London, Paris and Vienna between 1830 and 1848*, 2nd ed. (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004).

relationships. It is preferable to 'private', a term that is simply inaccurate for many eighteenth-century familiar letters, which were composed in company, voluntarily circulated beyond the addressee and frequently found their way into print.<sup>11</sup>

During the period under consideration here, letter-writing was not only fashionable, but it also served as training for entry into the literary world; several correspondents wrote with the intention that their letters would be published.<sup>12</sup> This observation is particularly relevant here, as some the 44 individuals considered were also authors.

The tone and content of correspondence is affected by its recipients, even when a restricted readership was in view, as illustrated by Thomas Twining's letters. As we will see, his correspondence with Charles Burney, with whom he shared strong theoretical and historical musical interests, is generally restricted to matters of fact and opinion. His correspondence with his brother, Richard, says little about Thomas's personal reaction to music since the two individuals responded to it in very different ways, music apparently meaning little to Richard. It is only in letters to his university friends that he reveals more about the impact music had on him, as illustrated in the letter with which this article began.

Diaries, like letters, often had a wider readership than is immediately apparent. This had been so from earlier times, when sections of 'spiritual diaries' were customarily published after their authors' deaths, but it was equally true in later times when, for example, governesses oversaw the writing of young women's diaries, and it was also the case in the period under discussion here.<sup>13</sup> And whether they were writing letters or diaries,

---

<sup>11</sup> Clare Brant, *Eighteenth-century letters and British culture* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006): 5.

<sup>12</sup> Susan E. Whyman, *The Pen and the People: English Letter Writers 1660-1800* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009): 191-192.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Dan Doll, and Jessica Munns, *Recording and Reordering: Essays on the Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century Diary and Journal* (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2006): 65 and Philippe Lejeune, 'The Practice of the Private Journal: Chronicle of an Investigation', in Rachael Langford and Russell West,



high-profile individuals in this and other periods must have known that their personal documents would be read by family and friends, or published.

In addition to readership, genre also affected the style of documents. Diaries and journals – it matters little which term is used<sup>14</sup> – in this period not infrequently take on the distinctive character of travel writing, especially those diaries that recount the adventures of their authors away from home. Expressions of wonder, awe, bafflement, amazement, and expressions of linguistic inadequacy caused by attempts to record the unfamiliar are common, but they often sit within a framework of resolutely factual reporting, according to the principles established by the Royal Society in 1660 and modelled by numerous later writers.<sup>15</sup> The emphasis is on the event or object observed, not on the author's emotional reaction to it. This sort of approach is typified in the travel writing of Charles Burney.<sup>16</sup>

All of the factors mentioned above have an effect on what we learn about listening from personal documents. Not least, they help to explain a common phenomenon in these sources – the absence of personal reactions to what was heard. Only relatively rarely do we read expressions of emotion, no doubt because virtues such as self-control needed to be foregrounded for the benefit of other readers, or because a relationship with another individual required certain boundaries to be maintained.

Two examples highlight the differing styles in which personal documents from the period are written and some of the interpretive issues associated with them. Both are

---

*Marginal Voices, Marginal Forms: Diaries in European Literature and History* (Amsterdam: Rodolpi, 1999): 196-197.

<sup>14</sup> Sidonie Smith, and Julia Watson, *Reading Autobiography: a Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 2001): 193, 196.

<sup>15</sup> Carl Thompson, *Travel Writing* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2011): 66-67, 73-74.

<sup>16</sup> Charles Burney's original manuscript text is transcribed in H. Edmund Poole, ed, *Music, Men and Manners in France and Italy, 1770: Being the Journal Written by Charles Burney During a Tour Through Those Countries Undertaken to Collect Material for a General History of Music* (London: Eulenburg Books, 1974) which was edited for Burney's, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy* (London: T. Becket & Co., 1771).

diaries, neither of which was published in the author's own lifetime, and both were written by characters whose listening we return to in greater detail in later sections of this article.

John Courtney (1734–1806) grew up in Beverley, Yorkshire. After studying at Trinity College, Cambridge, he returned to his home town where, having inherited family property and wealth, he settled into a comfortable social life which occasionally took him to places such as York, Hull, Bath and London. The informal, sometimes note-form of Courtney's diary is exemplified in an otherwise fairly extensive (for him) entry for 17 September 1789, in which he included details of events he attended in Hull:

This morn[ing] my Wife & I & my Son sat in East Gallery, as did Miss Cayley Mrs & Miss Metcalfe, best seat, & heard the Oratorio of Messiah. The Church was very full indeed & the singing & instrumental music exceeded far that of yesterday. The Songs by Harrison, Mrs Billington, & Miss Cantelo, were delightfully fine indeed, but Sale & Pearson I thought but very indifferent. I liked my Seat the best of any I had had. Mr Ashley told Mr Sykes they had never performed to so numerous & genteel an audience except at the abbey & at Worcester. I & my Son were at the Assembly. I did not dance. My Son danced with Miss Lucy Acklam. I drank Tea.<sup>17</sup>

The style is simple and factual, although brief opinions are expressed from time to time (the extract above contains more than most in Courtney's diaries). This has to do with the probability that he was writing for himself: nowhere in the diary is there any hint that Courtney intended it to be read by anyone other than himself. Presumably, therefore, it served as a simple aide-memoir of events he attended, people he met and music or performers that he heard. Courtney does not record his personal reaction to music, but his

---

<sup>17</sup> The extracts from Courtney's diaries relating to music are transcribed in Christopher Simon Roberts, 'Music and Society in Eighteenth-Century Yorkshire' (PhD diss., University of Leeds, 2014), Appendix D.

level of interest and involvement in what he heard can nevertheless be inferred from the extent of his evaluative comments, as we shall see. The style of this diary is in stark contrast to those of John Byng's.

John Byng (1742–1813) became fifth Viscount Torrington during the last weeks of his life. He was born into a naval family and became a page to George III before joining the army, in which he eventually rose to the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the 1<sup>st</sup> Foot Guards. He left the army in 1780 to take up a position with the Inland Revenue at Somerset House. Few personal documents of Byng's survive beyond the journals in which he recorded his travels around England and Wales in the 1780s and 1790s. Unlike other travel diaries of the period these documents were not written for publication during the author's lifetime, but it is nevertheless clear that they were intended to be read by, or to, other people. Byng summarised his approach in an introduction to an account of his journey to the west of England in 1782:

Tour writing is the very rage of the times; it is seldom that I am in the fashion, but fashions change so quickly that I am obliged, in their round, sometimes to find myself a man of mode. – Every one now describes the manners and customs of every country thro' which they pass, tho' but from an observation in a Margate-Hoy ... I dread not the reviewers, as I shall never hazard a bookseller's window ... my reviewers are in my own house; and it is from Mrs B[ying]'s assenting nod, and the (flattering) approbation of Harriet, that I receive the bays: wishing my descriptions to be, what most of my countrywomen are, elegant, neat and engaging; full of decency, simplicity and fancy; not tricked out with false taste, and French trimmings: to such

an imitation the pen must naturally soar, and study to adhere to the model proposed.<sup>18</sup>

This passage clearly shows that Byng's diaries were written for his wife and members of his household. The fact that people other than himself would have read them, or heard them read, almost certainly accounts for the polished and engaging style in which they are written. We may well imagine Byng revising drafts of their content while on his tours so that they could be used as family entertainment on his return. They are full of anecdote and opinion, with more than occasional glimpses of his personality. We will consider Courtney's and Byng's engagement with music below.

### *Listening in society*

Listeners in the period c1780–1830 often had multiple reasons for attending musical performances. Just as today, the pleasure of the occasion derived as much from seeing friends as from the performance itself; the two were not necessarily mutually exclusive. As William Weber has pointed out, we deceive ourselves if we think that modern audiences, or we ourselves, attend concerts with highly focussed thoughts on the music alone: 'Let us be honest about our own musical lives, remembering how much we ourselves gossip when we go, ritual-like, to our accustomed musical places'.<sup>19</sup> Commenting on points made in Christopher Small's *Musicking*, Stephanie Pitts observes of contemporary audience members that 'even individuals who attend [concerts] alone do so in relation to the larger social group', noting 'that conversation and refreshment are an important part of the social

---

<sup>18</sup> C. Bruyn Andrews, ed, *The Torrington Diaries Containing the Tours Throughout England and Wales of the Hon. John Byng (Later Fifth Viscount Torrington) Between the Years 1781 and 1794*, 5 vols, vol. 1 (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode Ltd, 1934): 69.

<sup>19</sup> William Weber, 'Did People Listen in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century?', *Early Music* 25/4 (Nov. 1997): 686.

interactions surrounding live music listening, and that feeling at home in the performance venue contributes to the pleasure of concert attendance'.<sup>20</sup> But there is an essential difference between present-day behaviour and the way in which late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century audiences conducted themselves. Nowadays, at least during performances of most 'classical' concerts (though not necessarily at other sorts of concerts), conversation and other manifestations of audience noise are put to one side as far as possible once the music starts. This was simply not the case in earlier times, as many listening accounts show.

As is well-known, social visits and other activities occurred during performances, such as those reported by Sarah Spencer (1787–1870), daughter of the second Earl Spencer, in a letter to her brother of 4 June 1808:

We went to the opera last night ... and it was a new one, the music rather pretty; inside our box we had our usual visits from Lord Temple and Willy Ponsonby, both of whom are so regular, I can hardly help laughing when they come in, like clockwork figures of fat and lean.<sup>21</sup>

The presence of high-ranking members of society proved to be particularly absorbing for many. Charles Wollaston (1765–1840), judge, composer and translator, some of whose correspondence was published posthumously along with other papers belonging to his half-sister Mary Frampton (1773–to 1846), wrote to the latter on 12 June 1814, following a visit to the opera five days previously:

---

<sup>20</sup> Stephanie Pitts, 'Musical, Social and Moral Dilemmas: Investigating Audience Motivations to Attend Concerts', in *Coughing and Clapping: Investigating Audience Experience*, ed. Karen Burland and Stephanie Pitts (Farnham and Burlington VT: Ashgate, 2014): 21-22. See also Christopher Small, *Musicking: the Meaning of Performance and Listening* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1998).

<sup>21</sup> Hugh Wyndham, ed, *Correspondence of Sarah Spencer, Lady Littleton 1787–1870* (London: John Murray, 1912): 16.

I dined in Park Place, and went to the opera with the Harbords and Selina Shirley ... Blucher [Gebhard von Blücher, Prince of Wahlstadt] came into the Duchess of York's box with her Royal Highness. The opera was quite forgotten, and everybody was up and upon the benches.<sup>22</sup>

The journal entry of 8 October 1818 by the poet, singer and songwriter Thomas Moore (1779–1852) is one of three in which men are singled out as the noisy members of the audience: 'In the evening the Phippses, Macdonald, his wife's sister and mother, to tea and supper; played and sung for them; dull audience; no sounding boards; the men, too, would rather talk than listen.'<sup>23</sup>

So used were they to noisy British audiences that listeners were surprised when they encountered different traditions in other countries. When Colonel Peter Hawker (1786–1853) attended a concert in The Hague on 28 April 1821 he noted that 'people were very well-behaved during the performance, no whistling or blackguard cries from the gallery like England, but all quiet and attentive like Paris'.<sup>24</sup> His observation that Parisian audiences were quiet by this time accords with some of the findings in studies of listening environments in the French capital.<sup>25</sup>

Individuals among the 44 studied here reacted in different ways to the general noise and commotion that characterised performances in this period. For some, the extra-musical elements enhanced their evenings out. The author Mary Berry (1763–1852), who came from

---

<sup>22</sup> Harriet Georgiana Mundy, ed, *The Journal of Mary Frampton, From the Year 1779, Until the Year 1846, Including Various Interesting and Curious Letters, Anecdotes, &c, Relating to Events Which Occurred During That Period* (London: Simpson Low, Marston, Searle and Rivington, 1885): 214-5.

<sup>23</sup> John Russell, ed, *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore* 8 vols, vol. 2 (London: Longman, Brown, Green, and Longmans, 1853): 187.

<sup>24</sup> *The Diary of Colonel Peter Hawker 1802–1853*, 2 vols, Vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1893): 222–3.

<sup>25</sup> For the comparison with Paris see James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: a Cultural History* (Berkeley; London: University of California Press, 1995). For a more nuanced, recent discussion see Katharine Ellis, 'Researching Audience Behaviours'.

a wealthy merchant background, is one of several who seem to have attended performances at least as much for their social aspects as for the music. This assessment is never stated explicitly in her diaries, which span the period 1783–1852, but it can almost certainly be inferred by the relative balance of her comments on the music she heard, the contexts in which she heard it, and the audience. When an individual such as she habitually expended great efforts to describe the physical or social setting of performances but devoted comparatively little space to describing the impression made by the performance we might reasonably conclude that the social occasion was at least as important as the music, if not more so.

For the period under discussion Mary Berry's diaries contain well over 100 recorded experiences of listening to music in both Britain and Europe. She clearly had sufficient knowledge of music to evaluate performances, at least in a general way. One singer, for example, is described as singing with 'wonderful expression and taste'<sup>26</sup> while an opera buffa is described as 'some of the prettiest music of the kind I ever heard'.<sup>27</sup> (Her taste did not wholly extend to the music of Mozart's *Figaro*, however, which she describes as 'delicious' before adding that 'I do not like music which from time to time mars the wit of Beaumarchais').<sup>28</sup> But nowhere in her journal or letters does she reveal herself as having been intensely affected by music, or deeply absorbed by it, including even the performances at Nelson's funeral on 13 January 1806, which was clearly a highly-charged occasion and of which her journal contains a detailed description. The following journal entry dated 18 May

---

<sup>26</sup> Theresa Lewis, ed, *Extracts From the Journal and Correspondence of Miss Mary Berry from the Year 1783 to 1852*, 3 vols., vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1865): 67.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid*: 72.

<sup>28</sup> Lewis, ed, *Extracts From the Journal and Correspondence of Miss Mary Berry*, vol. 3 (1865): 315.

1810 records her attendance at a concert in the Hanover Square rooms and is typical of her reporting:

Went to Bartheleman's concert with Lady Ellenborough. The party, Lord and Lady Ellenborough, Lord and Lady Dunmore, Lord Sidmouth, sat together very comfortably. The Handel part of the concert fine. The Hanover Square Rooms quite full of persons, not one of whose faces I had ever seen before. At the end of the first act I went away, and walked the whole length of the room with Mr. Rogers, through rows of people, all well or expensively dressed, who had paid half a guinea for their tickets, such a place is London!<sup>29</sup>

The description of the music is minimal, comments on the audience occupying the majority of the text, and the impression given is that the social occasion was at least as important to her as the music.

While there were several commentators like Mary Berry among the sample of 44, there were others who were perplexed that audience attention was so easily drawn away from music. Lady Charlotte Susan Maria Campbell Bury (1775-1861), author and Lady-in-Waiting to the royal household, acknowledged that those who wanted to be able to concentrate on the music were a minority when she reported on a concert in June 1819:

Last night we went to Lady [--]'s concert, and heard some fine finished singing; but there was nothing of pathos or of sentiment in the difficult and scientific pieces which were performed. The music, however, was good enough for all the attention that was paid to it by the company, who only meet (with few exceptions) to see and

---

<sup>29</sup> Lewis, ed, *Extracts From the Journal and Correspondence of Miss Mary Berry*, vol. 2 (1865): 418.



be seen, talk and be talked to, and care little in fact for the merits of the music they nominally assemble to listen to.<sup>30</sup>

Those who wanted to pay attention to music found ways of doing so despite being surrounded by distractions. The society hostess and daughter of the fifth Duke of Devonshire Henrietta Leveson Gower (1785-1862) positioned herself carefully in her box, as she related in a letter to her sister written on 20 November 1824:

In transport when, as last night, I sat in the dark corner of my box at the Italian Opera listening to Zuchelli, Cinti, and La Signora Mombelli, a little woman with a voice and articulation that charmed me. In despair when peeping out between the acts I beheld Hyde Parker and Onslow ogling the atmosphere.<sup>31</sup>

It was not just the behaviour of the audience to which some listeners objected, but also the populist trend in concert programming. In the late eighteenth century the format of concerts was largely predictable: Simon McVeigh describes the 'standardised two-part programme-format of some ten to twelve items, alternating instrumental and vocal items' as the norm.<sup>32</sup> But as time went on and West-end concerts in particular catered increasingly for a popular market, this programme structure was adapted and a greater emphasis on vocal items emerged in some concerts, while instrumental works were increasingly based on popular airs and the like.<sup>33</sup> Some listeners objected. The poet and rector's daughter Anna Seward (1742–1809) as well as Thomas Twining, both listeners to whom further consideration is given later in this article, were particularly disdainful of this populist trend.

---

<sup>30</sup> A. Francis Steuart, ed, *The Diary of a Lady-in-Waiting*, 2 vols, vol. 2 (London: John Lane, 1908): 189.

<sup>31</sup> F. Leveson Gower, ed, *Letters of Harriet Countess Granville, 1810–to 1845*, 3rd ed, 2 vols, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1894): 315.

<sup>32</sup> Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 101.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, *Music in London*, especially 57, 73, 83 and 103.

On five occasions in her correspondence Anna Seward expressed disapproval of those audience members whom she considered inattentive at the same time as lamenting programming that she clearly considered to be lightweight. For example, in a letter to Mrs Cotton dated 27 October 1785 she observed that:

Every harmonic meeting I attend leads me to ponder with new astonishment, the universal affectation of musical feeling, while the audience evince so little of its reality. How often do we perceive them either not listening at all, or with the most languid attention, to the sublimest compositions, both vocal and instrumental; to which, when a trifling ballad has succeeded, its notes have been imbibed with eager transport, and dismissed with volleys of applause.<sup>34</sup>

Thomas Twining went a step further, collecting together a small audience of like-minded listeners to hear some 'quality' music. Writing to his brother on 29 November 1796 he described a concert he had given with a pianist, Mrs Baker, commenting that 'I invited no unmusical, or half musical hearers, & we enjoyed the music we liked without the necessity of playing worse music to please popular & Ignorant hearers'.<sup>35</sup>

The account of Twining's select concert suggests that those who sought opportunities to listen attentively, away from noise and commotion of public concerts, found greater satisfaction in small, private venues rather than in public auditoriums. A larger body of evidence would throw further light on the public/private aspects of listening in this period, as acknowledged in another study of the subject,<sup>36</sup> but at least some of the evidence considered here suggests that those who had a keen interest in music valued a more

---

<sup>34</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol.1 (1811): 87–88.

<sup>35</sup> Walker, *Thomas Twining's Letters*, vol.2 (1991): 477.

<sup>36</sup> Wolfgang Fuhrmann, 'The Intimate Art of Listening: Music in the Private Sphere During the Nineteenth Century', in Thorau and Ziemer, *The Oxford Handbook of Music Listening*.

intimate setting than public performances afforded. Thomas Twining's experience with which this article began was certainly one of those, as he soaked up not just the music, but the intimate atmosphere ('snug & comfortable'). He enjoyed a similarly intimate performance by Pacchierotti which took place at the home of Charles Burney 'in a snug way'.<sup>37</sup>

### *Listeners' varying experiences*

The previous section distinguished listeners who enjoyed the busy social atmosphere of performances from those who liked to concentrate more intensely on the music, but while that simple distinction may hold good for a proportion of the listening public it does not characterise all of them adequately. The evidence of some individuals presents a more complex picture. Both John Courtney and John Byng, considered earlier, show how the same person reacted to music differently, depending on the occasion.

Like the accounts in Mary Berry's diary, John Courtney's mostly brief descriptions of musical performances in his home town generally contain more information about the social context of his listening than about the music. The following diary entry for 24 February 1790 is typical: 'I & my wife & my Son Thomas were at Mr Lambert's Concert. There was more Company than I ever saw at a Concert in Beverley'.<sup>38</sup> The impression given here, and on numerous other occasions, is that he was at least as interested in the social context of the evening as he was in the music. But what is intriguing about Courtney's listening is that he appears to have been much more attentive to music when he attended performances away from home. His diary entries for Hull, London, and other places where

---

<sup>37</sup> Walker, ed, *Thomas Twining's Letters*, vol.1 (1991), 178.

<sup>38</sup> Roberts, 'Music and Society', Appendix D.

he heard music away from the routine of local performances include a greater degree of detailed comment and musical evaluation. An example is the report of his visit to a concert in Hull on 17 September 1789, quoted earlier: 'the singing & instrumental music exceeded far that of yesterday. The Songs by Harrison, Mrs Billington, & Miss Cantelo, were delightfully fine indeed, but Sale & Pearson I thought but very indifferent'.<sup>39</sup> Courtney's comments are never extensive, but these show how his careful listening and attention to the music enabled him to evaluate and compare the singers, as well as the overall quality of the performance, with what he had heard on the previous day.

Why is there a discrepancy between the nature of Courtney's descriptions of music in his home town and in other places? It seems likely that the differences relate to two factors. The first concerns the nature of performances in his home town, where he attended events within the close community of which he was part. These events served many purposes: they were occasions on which partners for his children were assessed and other social transactions were made. His diary entries suggest that Courtney's attention to the nuances of local society behaviour outweighed the attention he gave to the music, whereas similar social distractions were unlikely to have been so prevalent when he travelled away from home. The second factor relates to the quality of performances. Since those in Beverley were given largely by local performers it is unlikely that they were of a high standard, and the evidence of Courtney's diaries suggests that the repertoire was limited. But on his travels he heard the country's best professional musicians performing music that would not have been heard in Beverley: there was every reason for him to listen attentively and make detailed notes. Courtney was certainly capable of listening carefully and chose to

---

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., Appendix D.

do so on some occasions, but on others he seems to have been more preoccupied with social matters: the nature of his listening seems to have depended on the context of the performance.

John Byng's diaries provide over 50 listening experiences and the general impression gained from them is that he was a respectful, but not very engaged listener, at least when he was listening to the kind of music that was regularly on offer in public or private concerts: when he listened to Welsh harpists he listened intently, as we will see.

Byng's apparent lack of interest in what we might term 'concert music' contrasts strikingly with his engagement with other aspects of culture. From his diaries we learn that he was widely read, familiar with writers such as Fielding, Richardson and Sterne, but particularly interested in 'history and anecdotes; a well written tour; a surprising voyage or a description of ancient customs, and manners. These are the books for my money.'<sup>40</sup> He was also interested in old and new architecture and fond of drawing. Byng was no cultural Philistine.

However, Byng's diary describes his aversion to listening at length to 'concert music'. He professed to prefer a simple tune. Recording a visit to Cheltenham in June 1781 he observed:

opposite to the pump is a new long room, where the papers are taken in, as also sometimes unfortunate young gentlemen. – On the other side is a band of fiddles, to assist with their musick the operation of the waters. Sorry I am to own that such musick is to me as delightful as the opera band or [J.C.] Bachs concerts; for I think no

---

<sup>40</sup> Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries* vol. 4 (1938): 72.

musick is pleasant, but when you can chuse your distance, or time of attention;  
otherwise I suffer worse than a young fidler's elbow.<sup>41</sup>

And in July of the same year he wrote of a performance in Oxford:

Miss R. afterwards gave us several fine pieces of musick in a very grand and superior stile; her finger and execution being both inimitable: but on these solemn occasions I feel myself like Mr Western in Tom Jones, and wish for an ordinary tune to relieve my vulgar ears, which soon get tired of difficult lessons, and hard concertos.<sup>42</sup>

The evidence is clear that Byng found 'concert music' tiresome, but his reaction to other types of music was very different. On several occasions during his travels he reports how he sought out Welsh harpists as he lodged at various town and village inns. For example, at Llangollen on 26 July 1793, having enquired earlier in the day about the local harpists he dined and subsequently fell asleep, but was 'agreeably awaken'd roused by the harper rattling away, at the bottom of the stairs'. The performance prompted the following reflection:

Good, or bad, provincial musick delights me ... and were I a Scotch or a Welsh resident, I certainly would retain a piper, or a harper; depend upon it, that hilarity would accompany him: – he would lead to the dance; and to the bowling green, and to dairy in the summer; and in winter, he would enliven the hall – and make merry the laundry. – I find that they should play noisy, and bustling tunes; not dwelling upon notes, but throwing them together.<sup>43</sup>

Fascination with Welsh harpists was embedded in parts of London's society in the eighteenth century, no doubt validated by the appointment of a harper to the Prince of

---

<sup>41</sup> Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries* vol. 1 (1934): 9-10.

<sup>42</sup> Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries* vol. 1 (1934): 56.

<sup>43</sup> Andrews, *The Torrington Diaries* vol. 3 (1936): 245.

Wales in 1736. Byng's obsession with harpists is first expressed in the account of his visit to Wales in the summer of 1784, the same year in which Edward Jones' *Musical and Poetical Relicks of the Welsh Bards* was published, which perhaps sparked his interest. Whatever the origins of Byng's enthusiasm, he formed strong views about the way that Welsh harpists should play. He preferred simplicity over artifice. On hearing the blind harpist Edward Jones (not the Edward Jones mentioned above) in Corwen on 27 July 1793 he wrote: 'These harpers will introduce variations, and spoil their tunes; which should be play'd simply, and manfully',<sup>44</sup> a view consistent with his stated preference for 'an ordinary tune to relieve my vulgar ears, which soon get tired of difficult lessons, and hard concertos' (see above).

Byng, then, was no lover of 'artifice' in music and endeavoured to avoid too much of it, preferring a wholly different repertoire which he sought out and to which he listened carefully and critically.

### *Absorbed listening*

Only a minority of the listeners considered so far have been described as highly absorbed in, or strongly affected by, musical performances. Of the 44 individuals considered for this study only a dozen or so explicitly describe these sorts of responses and a number of them record just a few instances. Those that exist are distributed roughly equally between male and female authors.

Of all the sources studied it is the 60 or so listening accounts written by Anna Seward to a wide variety of men and women in the years 1784 to 1807 that include the highest density of accounts of intense engagement with music. Anna Seward seems to have had an

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid: 250. The Edward Jones heard by Byng was known as Edward Jones (Llangollen): he won the Denbigh Eisteddfod in 1828. The other Edward Jones was also known by the bardic name Bardd y Brenin.

innate propensity for responding to music and an ability to express her feelings vividly. Archibald Constable, who prepared her letters for publication in a series of six volumes in 1811, two years after her death, noted that 'it is to be feared, that even in these familiar epistles, several affectations of style, arising mostly from too free an use of poetic imagery, may tend somewhat to obscure their real merit'. Of her character he observed that she had 'an independent and vigorous mind, entering with animation into every subject which is presented to it'.<sup>45</sup>

Anna Seward does not seem to have been encouraged to respond strongly to music as a child. She was not from a musical family and it is unlikely that she engaged in music-making at an early age. Although her grandfather was a 'tolerable' player on the bass viol none of her mother and two aunts 'could, in the least degree, distinguish one tune from another'.<sup>46</sup> She herself had little or no musical tuition until she was in her 20s, so in contrast to many of her peers she was an adult learner, as she explains:

Without time to have attained any degree of skill in the practical part of music, which I never attempted till I had passed my twentieth year, yet my taste for it has been cultivated and refined, by listening to frequent conversations on the subject, not from arrogant and comparatively ignorant dilettantis, but from ingenious professors; - and by living in the almost daily habit of hearing vocal music, in those perfectly fine tones, and with that elegance, pathos, energy, and varied powers, which marries it to poetry.<sup>47</sup>

The strength of Anna's response to music can be judged by the following description written to Mrs Hayley in 1795 of the effects produced on her by hearing Handel's music:

---

<sup>45</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 1 (1811): vii.

<sup>46</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 2 (1811): 275-6.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*: 5.



The musical opinions expressed in your last [letter] do not coincide with Giovanni's [John Saville's] and mine, to whom the choruses of Handel are dearer than any other species of music. The exhilaration and rapture with which they inspire me are extreme; so is the admiration they excite of the genius and skill of that great master, as the "volant fugue" bursts from every part of the orchestra successively; the leading air supplied, in turn, by the various orders of voices, and sustained by the rich fulness of the inner harmonies.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to describing her reactions to particular performances Anna Seward sometimes comments on broader listening topics. One of those is music's ability to invoke powerful responses to the past. This is a well-recognised theme in the modern literature of listening. For instance, in one study of contemporary listening, Sloboda, O'Neill and Ivaldi remark that 'the use of music as a cue to reminiscence (nostalgia) is the single most frequent use reported' and in her book *Music in Everyday Life* Tia DeNora devotes several pages to a discussion of music and memory.<sup>49</sup> The letter with which this article began refers to Thomas Twining's reaction on hearing music that was little performed at the time, but which reminded him of 'departed friends', and other sources quoted in this article discuss the same phenomenon. However, none of the listeners studied here are as explicit on the theme of music and reminiscence as Anna Seward, one of whose letters contains the following remarks:

Perfectly am I aware of the magical power of associated ideas, of whose relative connection we are sometimes anxious, but oftener, as you admirably observe, are

---

<sup>48</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 4 (1811): 69-70.

<sup>49</sup> John A. Sloboda, Susan A. O'Neil and Antonia Ivaldi, 'Functions of Music in Everyday Life: an Exploratory Method Using the Experience Sampling Method' in *Musicae Scientiae* 5/1 (2001): 12-13; Tia DeNora, *Music in Everyday Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000): 62-68.

unable to trace, or define it. Those pleasurable sensations are especially linked to verses, and to musical airs, and most forcibly when verse and music have, in union, seized upon our attention during seasons of happiness. Many a silly song, with which my ears had been familiar in childhood and rising youth, does at this hour, on recurrence, act upon my nerves with great luxury of sensation, though I do not impute the luxury to any merit in that which produced it.<sup>50</sup>

Anna Seward corresponded with a large number of people, evidently assuming that many of them would be interested in her personal reactions to music: her detailed descriptions of these reactions are evenly spread throughout her correspondence. In contrast, Thomas Twining only occasionally commented on the way in which music affected him (see the beginning of this article for an example). His letters were written predominantly to a small circle of male recipients, including Charles Burney with whom Twining loved to correspond about theoretical and historical matters and to whom he sent several of the 40 or so letters in which Twining discusses his listening. These letters rarely include remarks about Twining's feelings about the music he heard: their tone probably reflects Burney's primary interests in the subject and Twining's eagerness to engage with him intellectually.

Another of Twining's regular correspondents was his half-brother Richard. Again, while there are a few places in which Thomas reveals his personal reactions to what he heard, the listening accounts in these letters are generally of a factual nature. This is probably accounted for by the fundamentally different ways in which the half-brothers

---

<sup>50</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 6 (1811): 37-8.

experienced music, as outlined in a letter from Thomas to Richard dated 24 September 1797:

Music is not an indifferent thing to me: I can't hear it *by the bye*. It either pleases me a great deal, or fatigues me a great deal. I dare say you have remarked something of this, tho' your ears are made of leather & can't therefore feel so much, either of pleasure or offence, as my ears.<sup>51</sup>

Between them, Charles Burney and Richard Twining received more than half of the letters in which Thomas Twining related his listening experiences. No wonder, then, that we have only a few detailed accounts of his own reactions to music, though there can be no doubt that he experienced it deeply. Twining is a good example of a letter writer whose descriptions of listening are dependent to a significant extent on the interests and character of the recipient.

From the correspondence of Anna Seward and Thomas Twining it is clear that both continued to be affected by music throughout their lives, but we should not assume that all those listeners who enjoyed intense experiences of listening at some time or other did so consistently. Although this does not seem to have applied to Anna Seward, she commented in a letter to Sophia Weston on 17 April 1787 that:

Familiarity with excellence has a prevailing tendency to chill and blunt sensibility of its graces, and to render the judgment coy and fastidious. Upon two people, whose taste for music was by nature perhaps equally keen, if one of them has been in the constant custom of hearing the best music, and the other has had but seldom opportunity of listening even to the most moderate, probably the simplest air, of

---

<sup>51</sup> Walker, *Thomas Twining's Letters* vol. 2 (1991): 499.

perhaps but indifferent merit, would have more effect upon the passions of the novice, than the sublimest air of Pergolezzi's or Handel's, upon the feelings of him whose ear had been habituated to their admirable compositions.<sup>52</sup>

The prolific opera commentator Richard Edgcumbe, the second Earl of Mount Edgcumbe (1764-1839), seems to have experienced just this sort of blunting of his sensibility to music. Late in life, in 1828, he wrote a lengthy critique of the singer Catalani commenting of her performance that it 'excited feelings with which music had long ceased to inspire me'.<sup>53</sup>

As Anna Seward suggests, intense listening was sometimes prompted by an encounter with novelty, or with something exceptional or unfamiliar that grabbed the listener's attention. This is unsurprising since accounts of these sorts of listening experiences occur from time to time across all types of listeners from all historical periods. Among the sample studied here it is striking to read several accounts of listening to the 1738 organ by Müller in St Bavo's church in Haarlem, which always seems to have elicited an intense reaction. Because the organ building traditions of Great Britain and northern Europe were so different, British listeners would have heard nothing as grand and imposing as this organ, which remains one of the most famous in the world. All of the listeners who mention it were astonished at its effect. Peter Hawker's account of his experience in 1821 is typical:

Schumann [the organist] ... first played me the Hallelujah Chorus, which had a tremendous effect; next, an imitation of the human voice, which was wonderful; and last, an extempore storm, in which I defy the strictest observer to distinguish the thunder from that of nature, and in which the rain, and the storm birds singing

---

<sup>52</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 1 (1811): 286-7.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Edgcumbe (Earl of Mount Edgcumbe), *Musical Reminiscences: Containing an Account of Italian Opera in England, From 1773*, 4<sup>th</sup> edn (London: John Andrews; Richmond: F.H. Wall, 1834): 199-201.

before the tempest, with the solemn echo of the church, had an effect on the feelings which surpassed any sermon that even Mr. Pitman, Mr. Penfold, or Dr. Andrews could have preached.<sup>54</sup>

### *Tears*

Sometimes, intense listening experiences resulted in tears. This article began with an example described by Thomas Twining in a letter to his friend and university tutor John Hey. We now return to it in order to examine its detail and its broader social context. The letter describes how he cried in front of another university friend, Henry Elmsall:

we dined with [Joah] Bates one day, & heard Miss [Sarah] Harrop sing from tea-time till ten o'clock; snug & comfortable; no audience but the two Bates's, Mrs. Bates, & ourselves. One of the greatest musical treats I ever had. I had, as Sir Hugh Evans says, "great dispositions to cry"; nay, the tears actually came out, and Elmsall said he should have cried if he had not seen how foolish I looked. She sung Pergolesi, Leo, Hasse -- things I know, & that nobody sings. It gave me some faint idea of meeting one's departed friends in Heaven.<sup>55</sup>

According to the extract there were two factors in Twining's description that made the performance conducive to tears. The first was the occasion itself. As discussed above, this was a private listening experience in a 'snug & comfortable environment' in which Twining was surrounded by like-minded musicians. There were no distractions. The second factor was the repertoire. These were older works, the likes of which were rarely performed

---

<sup>54</sup> *The Diary of Colonel Peter Hawker*, vol. 1, (1893): 222-223.

<sup>55</sup> Walker, *Thomas Twining's Letters* vol. 1 (1991): 178.

in public at the time. Encountering music of this sort was a particular treat, perhaps similar to the singing of childhood songs described by Anna Seward.

But the circumstances of this performance were not the only factors that encouraged his crying. In the broader cultural context of the 1780s tears were an accepted, if not entirely uncontroversial element of social life. So how frequently did listeners cry in response to music during the period c1780–1830? Of the 44 listeners studied for this article four (including Twining) mention tearful reactions to musical performances. Some mention crying on more than one occasion. In an account of listening dated 1791 William Gardiner (1770–1853) reported that tears were shed at performances of the singer Pacchiarotti – they were the orchestra’s tears, rather than Gardiner’s:

Besides having a fine shake, exquisite taste, and great fancy, he had a divine expression of pathetic songs, and such were the touching effects of his voice that the performers in the orchestra, who accompanied him, were often brought to tears.<sup>56</sup>

Thomas Moore’s journals and letters contain several references to crying in response to music. In a letter written on 7 November 1803 to his mother he noted that one Miss Matthews had played some of Moore’s sisters’ lessons, which brought the tears into my eyes with recollection<sup>57</sup> (a further example of a powerful response to reminiscence, probably intensified on this occasion by hearing familiar music on foreign soil in Norfolk, Virginia). Moore also mentions several other instances of crying (in the years 1818 to 1822), both the tears of individuals and the tears of groups of listeners containing both men and women.<sup>58</sup> On two occasions (in 1790 and 1806) Anna Seward records tears being shed in

---

<sup>56</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends*, vol. 2 (1838): 626.

<sup>57</sup> Russell, *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore*, vol. 1 (1853): 139.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*: xxxvj; vol. 2 (1853): 175-6, 214, 318-9; vol. 3 (1853): 102, 313, 314.

reaction to performances, but rather than emphasising her own personal experience, she comments on the simultaneous crying of a group of people of which she was part.<sup>59</sup>

Tearful reactions should not surprise us, considering the well-documented effects of the culture of sensibility which was evident during the period, for example, in the novels of Samuel Richardson and Laurence Sterne.<sup>60</sup> But male crying remained controversial. A significant strand of recent research on manliness and masculinity examines contemporary conduct literature, personal correspondence and diaries in order to assess the real extent to which male sensibility was exhibited in society at the end of the eighteenth and in the early decades of the nineteenth centuries. It reveals a complex picture of male behaviour which varied to some extent according to factors such as social class, location (urban or provincial) and family background.<sup>61</sup> Of course, changes in behaviours also took place over time and we should not assume, for example, that all men brought up in the second half of the eighteenth century read the most recent conduct literature, or received the latest advice and guidance from their families or their university mentors.<sup>62</sup> Instead, the discussion about manliness and sensibility in the period c1780–1830 is nuanced. Philip Carter explores the relationship between the two, pointing out that to speak of their co-existence:

is not to deny an often tense relationship between being manly and possessed of feeling. These tensions often came less from outright detractors, shocked at the unnaturalness or unmanliness of men in tears, than from sympathetic advocates, like

---

<sup>59</sup> Constable, ed, *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 3 (1811): 40, vol. 6 (1811): 282-3.

<sup>60</sup> See, for example, Tom Lutz, *Crying, The Natural and Cultural History of Tears* (New York, London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), especially 40-41, 180.

<sup>61</sup> Philip Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society, Britain 1660–1800* (Harlow: Longman, 2001), Philip Carter, 'Tears and the Man', in Sarah Knott and Barbara Taylor, eds, *Women, Gender and Enlightenment* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), Henry French and Mark Rothery, *Man's Estate. Landed Gentry Masculinities c.1660–c.1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), John Tosh, *Manliness and Masculinities in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Harlow: Pearson, 2005).

<sup>62</sup> See, for example, French and Rothery, *Man's estate*: 105-106 and John Tosh, *Manliness and masculinities*, pp.63ff.

Philip Francis, and indeed Mary Wollstonecraft, who saw themselves rescuing genuine sensibility from an effeminacy prompted by false or unregulated expression.<sup>63</sup>

The effeminacy referred to here was widely criticised and characterised by overly-sensitive behaviour. Perhaps its most extreme expression was in foppish behaviour which, as well as a heightened sensitivity, also included flamboyant dressing, extravagant wigs and a preference for female company.<sup>64</sup> Twining was therefore treading on controversial ground when he described his reaction to music and although there is no doubt that he cried, his description is measured. There were no other physical gestures or verbal expressions, and there was no immediate flood of tears. The account begins cautiously with 'great dispositions to cry'. The tears then 'actually came out', the phrase suggesting that the tears were a little reluctant to emerge. Twining's description of his tears may have been fairly circumspect, but his friend Elmsall evidently held a different view from Twining's on the subject of crying: he just thought that Twining looked 'foolish'.

Philip Clarke's chapter 'Tears and the man' begins by examining a conversation between Edmund Burke and Sir Philip Francis about Burke's description of his own tearful reaction to the ejection of Marie Antoinette from Versailles in October 1789. The discussion between the two men resulted in a letter from Burke to Francis, upon which Carter comments:

In his February 1790 letter to Philip Francis, Burke predicted that men of 'true feeling' would continue to be moved to tears long after his death (1796) and that of Francis (1818). The popular perception of criticism to such displays during the

---

<sup>63</sup> Carter, 'Tears and the man': 157-158.

<sup>64</sup> Carter, *Men and the Emergence of Polite Society*, chapter 4.



nineteenth century ... suggests that Burke's 'natural feelings' became rather more marginalized as an indice of manhood than he had predicted.<sup>65</sup>

These comments are not entirely borne out by the listeners' tears studied here, which occurred between 1780 and 1822, with a heavy concentration in the years 1818 to 1822 (both male and female tears are reported into the 1820s). But we will need a larger sample in order to assess the extent of crying as a reaction to music in the early decades of the nineteenth century.

### *The Language of Listening Accounts*

The listeners considered so far ranged from those who tended to be more-or-less indifferent to music to those who were deeply affected by it. Sometimes more than one characteristic is evidenced in a single person. We know all this because the accounts themselves are either explicit about their authors' reactions to music, or because the impact it had on them is evident from the extent to which music features in their descriptions of performances. A further indication of the extent of listeners' engagement with music is the language they use to describe it. In summary, those who wrote about their intense listening experiences also tended to use a rich vocabulary to describe them while those who habitually listened to music more casually used a much more limited vocabulary.

The terms used by writers to describe their experiences provide clues to the intensity of their listening. Among those words used by virtually every individual studied here is 'fine', which is often used in generalised descriptions of listening such as Mary Berry's account of a performance in Hanover Square on 18 May 1810: 'The Handel part of

---

<sup>65</sup> Carter, 'Tears and the man': 170.

the concert fine'.<sup>66</sup> Other adjectives that are used frequently and in a general way include 'admirable', 'agreeable', 'charming', 'delightful', 'enchanted', 'pleasing', and 'pretty'. Of these words, the last is probably the most interesting. Whereas in modern usage it typically means little more than 'superficially pleasing', in the period c1780–1830 it sometimes took on more of its traditional meaning of 'clever', or 'skilful', as in the following account of Thomas Moore's: 'Mad. De Broglie sang with me, "Go where Glory waits Thee," and pronounced the words (all except "hearth," which she made rather a startling sound of) very prettily'.<sup>67</sup> Nevertheless, 'pretty' is usually used in much the same way as 'fine' to provide a generally favourable, but non-specific assessment of a performance. Like the other words mentioned, it is particularly prevalent in the writings of those for whom listening was rarely, if ever, a very intense affair.

Listeners who wrote about their intense reactions to music tended to use a much more varied vocabulary. There is no better example than Anna Seward who, being a poet, understandably uses a rich language palette, although others with no particular claims to literary expertise wrote in similar ways. A small sample of Seward's prose from a report of a concert on 27 October 1790 illustrates this point:

I ventured to one of the morning music festivals at Shrewsbury, and heard Mr Saville open the Messiah with a pathos, an energy, and a grace that none ever excelled, and which I never heard equalled'.<sup>68</sup>

This sort of language provides a much more vivid account than Mary Berry's brief 'The Handel part of the concert fine', quoted above. Whereas Mary Berry's simple 'fine' served to discuss a whole Handel performance, Anna Seward used 'pathos', 'energy' and 'grace' to

---

<sup>66</sup> Lewis, ed, *Extracts From the Journal and Correspondence of Miss Mary Berry*, vol. 2 (1865): 418.

<sup>67</sup> Russell, ed., *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondence of Thomas Moore*, vol. 3 (1853): 306.

<sup>68</sup> Constable, ed., *Letters of Anna Seward*, vol. 3 (1811): 37.

describe a small section. The use of multiple words such as these is by no means confined to Anna Seward's accounts. For example, in the same letter as Thomas Twining describes his tears he also refers to Pacchierotti's singing as having 'taste, spontaneous variation, delicacy, & expression'.<sup>69</sup> Accounts with rich descriptions such as these are absent from the writing of Mary Berry and others of the 44 writers considered here who show little evidence of being strongly affected by music. The richer linguistic palette of Seward and Twining provides an altogether more detailed impression of what they heard, reflecting their close attention to music.

Two words in particular seem to serve as something of a barometer of intensity among the sources studied; 'sublime' and 'sensitivity'. These words are rarely used by the likes of Mary Berry (who never used them herself to describe music), but are frequently found in sources in which the powerful effects of music are described. Charles Greville (1794-1865) is one such example. In a diary entry written on 20 November 1829 he announces himself as an intense listener by describing a performance of a song by Thomas Moore which 'produces an exceeding sadness, and brings to mind a thousand melancholy recollections, and generates many melancholy anticipations'.<sup>70</sup> Later journal entries of his describe music as 'sublime', especially the experience of listening to the choir in the Sistine Chapel and in St. Peter's, Rome, both of which he described in this way in April 1830. No doubt other aspects of the occasion contributed to the overall effect – ritual, candles, stained glass, architecture, and so on.

The word 'sensitivity' is used less than 'sublime' in this study's sources. Rather than describing a performance it is often used to characterise the qualities of a singer, always

---

<sup>69</sup> Walker, *Thomas Twining's Letters*, vol.1: 178-9.

<sup>70</sup> Henry Reeve, ed., *The Greville Memoirs: a Journal of the Reigns of King George IV and King William IV*, 3 vols, vol. 1 (London: Longmans, Green and Co, 1874): 245.

within a context of appreciation by a writer. So at the end of the letter quoted at the beginning of this article Twining says of Pacchierotti that 'he seems to have a great deal of sense, sensibility, taste, & modesty'.<sup>71</sup> Performers with 'sensibility' were able to touch the feelings of listeners by the way that they sang or played.

'Sublime' and 'sensibility' are interesting terms because they have such strong aesthetic and cultural connotations. Both feature significantly in the aesthetic writings of the eighteenth century and we have already seen how the culture of sensibility found its expression in some listeners' reactions to music. But how much knowledge did these listeners have of the literature in which the concepts were discussed, and to what extent were the terms used simply because they were in general use? These are issues that deserve a much more thorough investigation than can be included here, but among the listeners studied for this article there is at least one who was familiar enough with the literature on aesthetics to have a clearly-defined knowledge of the terms.

Thomas Twining not only knew the works of philosophers (in the letter that opens this article he refers to Descartes), but he wrote on aesthetics himself. His translation of Aristotle's treatise on poetry was published alongside two 'dissertations' in which he explained Aristotle's thinking and applied it to a contemporary understanding of music. The essential notion with which he grapples is the nature of musical imitation, concluding that 'music can be said to imitate no further than as it expresses something'.<sup>72</sup> The connection between music and expression is emphasised further in statements such as 'the highest power of music and that from which "it derives its greatest efficacy"', is undoubtedly its

---

<sup>71</sup> Walker, ed, *A Selection of Thomas Twining's Letters* vol. 1 (1991): 180.

<sup>72</sup> Thomas Twining, *Aristotle's Treatise on Poetry, Translated: with Notes on the Translation and on the Original: and Two Dissertations on Poetical, and Musical, Meaning*, 2nd ed by Daniel Twining (London: Luke Hansard & Sons, 1812): 66.

power of raising *emotions*'.<sup>73</sup> For Twining, music and emotion were inextricably linked and when he used terms such as 'sensibility' and 'sublime' we can be fairly certain that he understood their specific aesthetic meanings. To what extent the same was true of other writers remains a subject for future study, but what is established here is that listeners tended to use vocabulary in distinctive ways according to the intensity of their listening.

### *Conclusions*

According to recent studies, the silent listening that characterises modern audiences who attend 'classical' music concerts, opera and so on emerged in the course of the nineteenth century. When and where it developed remains a matter for discussion and debate, but there can be no doubt that prior to the establishment of the convention audiences behaved in very different ways. The apparent disrespect shown to music by those who attended public performances in Britain at the end of the eighteenth century and early decades of the nineteenth is striking, but in the light of the evidence of the 44 listeners considered in this study we should not conclude that listeners uniformly treated the music they heard as merely incidental to their socialising. (Similarly, we should probably not conclude that later, silent audiences were necessarily deeply engaged with the music they heard.) In reality, the situation was much more nuanced.

The balance of evidence suggests that the majority of listeners in Britain c1780-1830 did indeed attend musical performances largely for the sake of the social interaction that such occasions afforded, and although they may have been sufficiently informed as to be able to offer opinions on the music they heard their attention was often elsewhere.

---

<sup>73</sup> Ibid: 69.

However, there was a minority of people who found noisy and distracted behaviour tiresome, and who regularly complained about audiences in their correspondence. Sometimes these individuals were able to concentrate on the music by positioning themselves carefully within the audience environment, but their best opportunities for listening seem to have arisen in the private sphere. Further study of listening in public and private environments is needed in order to assess just how different the experiences were.

Throughout the period under consideration some listeners were deeply affected by music. Just as today, novel experiences and reminders of past events or contexts elicited strong reactions and in some circumstances listeners were moved to tears. The expression of tears in company owes much to the culture of sensibility during the period and it is clear that both men and women cried. Indeed, it has proved impossible to distinguish between male and female reactions to music more generally in the course of this study: both men and women were among those for whom social occasions seemed to matter more than the music that was on offer, and both men and women were among those who were deeply affected by music, or even moved to tears. The impression given by the 44 listeners represented in this study is that the impact of music on individuals during the period was unrelated to gender distinctions.

The modern literature of listening draws distinctions between types of listening. Different categorisations are used, but the essential notion remains the same: terms such as 'absorbed', 'distracted', 'inattentive', and so on are used to describe the quality of listening on a given occasion and are sometimes used to describe the listeners themselves. Useful though these terms are in some contexts, this study clearly shows that listeners in the past listened in one way on one occasion, but very differently on another. Both John Courtney and John Byng exhibited this characteristic according to the evidence of their diaries and

Mount Edgcumbe admitted that he had lost much of the capacity to react to music in later years. All of this should warn us against any tendency to adopt too simplistic a view of the way people listened to music. The quality of individuals' listening on any given occasion clearly depended on a number of factors, including social context, familiarity or otherwise of the music being performed, and an individual's own interests.

Our view of how people listened in the past is highly dependent on personal documents, particularly diaries and correspondence. Yet these sorts of documents from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (unlike their more self-absorbed modern counterparts) are frequently devoid of detailed descriptions of individuals' reactions to music. Rather, these early diaries and letters tend to report listening in a brief, factual manner, if indeed they report it at all. The absence of overt descriptions of emotional responses may in part be accounted for by the contemporary readership of these documents, which tended to be more public than we might superficially suspect, but it also depends on literary conventions, such as the travel journal style, with its aspirations to accurate and factual reporting. With careful study, taking into account the author's personality, the documents' readership, the personal and social context in which they were written and the detail of the language used, these diaries and letters reveal a rich picture of the way in which listeners of the past reacted to music.