

MUSIC IN 19TH-CENTURY BRITAIN

ROUTLEDGE

Mendelssohn and Victorian England

COLIN TIMOTHY EATOCK

An **Ashgate** Book

MENDELSSOHN AND VICTORIAN ENGLAND

To my parents

Mendelssohn and Victorian England

COLIN TIMOTHY EATOCK

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Contents

<i>List of Illustrations</i>	<i>vii</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>ix</i>
<i>Note on the Text</i>	<i>xiii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>General Editor's Series Preface</i>	<i>xvii</i>
1 Music in the Metropolis, 1829	1
2 The First Visit	21
3 Consolidation in the 1830s	47
4 Mendelssohn Mania in the 1840s	67
5 <i>Elijah</i> and the End	93
6 Apotheosis	115
7 Fragmentation and Legacy	133
Appendix A Glossary of Names	151
Appendix B Mendelssohn's Participation in Public and Semi-public Performances in England	161
<i>Select Bibliography</i>	<i>173</i>
<i>Index</i>	<i>185</i>



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List of Illustrations

- | | | |
|---|---|-----|
| 1 | Portrait of Felix Mendelssohn by James Warren Childe
(by permission of the Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/Art Resource, NY) | 33 |
| 2 | Sketch of Durham Cathedral by Felix Mendelssohn
(by permission of the Bodleian Library, University of Oxford
(d. 2, fol. 10)) | 38 |
| 3 | Detail from cartoon of <i>Antigone</i> , from <i>Punch</i> magazine 18 January
1845 (reproduced with permission of Punch Ltd, www.punch.co.uk) | 95 |
| 4 | Illustration of the premiere of <i>Elijah</i> , from the <i>Illustrated London
News</i> (by permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library) | 102 |
| 5 | Woodcut of the Mendelssohn statue, from the <i>Illustrated London
News</i> (by permission of the Mary Evans Picture Library) | 121 |
| 6 | Caricature of Mendelssohn by Aubrey Beardsley
(author's collection) | 140 |



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Preface

This is the first book to be written about the composer Felix Mendelssohn's relationship with England in the nineteenth century. That it should be the first extensive study devoted wholly to this subject is perhaps surprising, given Mendelssohn's ten highly successful trips to England between 1829 and 1847, and the admiration that was lavished upon his music throughout the British Isles. Moreover, in the decades following his sudden death in 1847, Mendelssohn was idolized in England, and his influence was widely hailed as a boon to the nation's musical culture.

The Rev. H.R. Haweis wrote, in his widely read book of 1871, *Music and Morals*:

We may fairly date the present wave of musical progress in this country from the advent of Mendelssohn. It is now more than 30 years ago since he appeared at the Philharmonic, and, both as a conductor and pianist, literally carried all before him. He brought with him that reverence for art, and that high sense of the artist's calling, without which art is likely to degenerate into a mere pastime, and the artist himself into a charlatan. The young composer read our native bands some useful lessons. Himself the chevalier of music – *sans peur et sans reproche* – sensitive indeed to criticism, but still more alive to the honour of art, he could not brook the slightest insult or slur upon music.

The following year, Charles Horsley, a composer and former student of Mendelssohn, made a similar observation in the American periodical *Dwight's Journal of Music*:

... I have always considered it to his [Mendelssohn's] generosity and open-heartedness to my countrymen, as well as to his frequent visits to England, that the foundation of that large reaction in favour of classical music, especially as regards the whole of Sebastian Bach's work, and the later compositions of Beethoven, which has taken place within the last 40 years in the British Empire, may be traced.

Both Haweis and Horsley implicitly connected Mendelssohn to the development of classical music in Victorian England: an era of growth, marked by an increase in the number of orchestras, choral societies, concert series, music schools and music publishers – and especially by an expansion of audiences.

Yet in the late Victorian era, 'progressive' opinion began to turn against Mendelssohn. George Bernard Shaw, writing in *The Star* newspaper in 1888, famously denounced Mendelssohn for his 'kid glove gentility, his conventional

sentimentality and his despicable oratorio mongering'. And in 1902, one year after Victoria's death, the musical scholar J.A. Fuller Maitland, in his *English Music in the XIXth Century*, charged that indigenous English composition had been suppressed by 'foreign dominations'. Within this nationalistic view of musical history, Mendelssohn was portrayed as an unhelpful, even harmful, influence, and once this interpretation became an established tenet, little more was said on the subject during much of the twentieth century.

One notable exception, however, was an article published in *Music and Letters* by the musicologist Nicholas Temperley in 1962 entitled 'Mendelssohn's Influence on English Music'. He argued that previous claims made by British scholars concerning the influence of Mendelssohn on English music were 'greatly exaggerated':

First we are told that Mendelssohn's influence was exceptional and was the first force strong enough to break the 'sheer monopoly of Handelian influence'. In reality, it was just one of a series of foreign influences to which English music was particularly susceptible. Most of them, in their day, were as strong as Mendelssohn's and many of them lasted as long. J.C. Bach, Haydn, Dussek, Mozart, Rossini, Spohr, Mendelssohn, Gounod, Brahms, Wagner, Strauss – each of these in turn captured the allegiance of the xenophile English musician.

Temperley's views offered a refreshing departure from the 'foreign dominations' theory of the early twentieth century. Unfortunately, this article was written at a time when Mendelssohn scholarship was in a weaker position than it is today: since 1962, much information has come to light concerning Mendelssohn's visits to England, his reception within the musical community and other aspects of his relationship with the nation. Thus, the claim that Mendelssohn was no more prominent than many other continental composers falters in the face of current knowledge. None of the other composers mentioned by Temperley attained the widespread popularity and celebrity of Mendelssohn. And most of them did not make any serious attempt to integrate professionally and personally with England's musical culture, as did Mendelssohn.

To most continental composers, England was little more than a conveniently exploitable place to acquire wealth through performances, commissions and publishing ventures. By contrast, Mendelssohn cultivated what might be called a philanthropic interest in the country, and actively sought to aid the cause of English music and musicians by transmitting his own artistic values to England. In so doing, he assumed a role in its culture unlike that of any other leading continental composer. His efforts on behalf of musical England were acknowledged in these words of gratitude, appearing in *The Musical Examiner* in 1844:

Who helped to make the European reputation of Sterndale Bennett? – MENDELSSOHN! Who pronounced Mrs. Alfred Shaw and Miss Clara Novello the best singers in Germany? – MENDELSSOHN! Who has on all occasions spoken with enthusiasm of English musicians, and enforced a respect for them in Germany,

which but for him would perhaps *never* have existed in that prejudiced country?
– MENDELSSOHN!

The time has come for a fresh assessment of Mendelssohn's role in England's musical culture. In this book I have attempted to show how Mendelssohn became enormously popular and influential in England, and how he interacted with the socio-cultural forces that shaped the nation's musical values. As such, this book is a biographical work, yet it is not a biography in the conventional sense. On one hand, I have presented, in as much detail as possible, accounts of Mendelssohn's ten trips to Britain and his dealings with British musicians and other people he met. On the other hand, I have limited description of his activities in Germany to the minimum required for context and intelligibility. (In total, Mendelssohn spent less than two years, or about 10 per cent of his short adult life, in Britain, and the remaining 90 per cent of his time in continental Europe. Here, the ratio is reversed: 90 per cent of this book is concerned with his time in and relationship to Britain, and the remaining 10 per cent is devoted to the continent.) The final chapters of this book, which extend beyond Mendelssohn's life, are an examination of his posthumous reception in England to the end of the Victorian era.

Mendelssohn and Victorian England is the product of three years' research, during which time I examined many books, letters, diaries, memoirs, newspapers, magazines, concert programmes, scholarly journals and other documents in libraries in England, Germany and the United States. While the abundance of source materials was a blessing, it was also a curse, as the sheer volume of information available about Victorian England's musical culture can be daunting. Also daunting is the vast number of individuals who participated in this culture. As a result, this book contains many references to many people – some of whom are famous today and need little introduction, but many of whom have fallen into obscurity. As an aid to the reader, a Glossary of Names (Appendix A) may be found at the back, containing brief descriptive references to more than 100 named persons.

Colin Eatock
Toronto, 2009



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Note on the Text

Opus numbers appear only for the first time a work is mentioned and are not repeated for subsequent mentions, unless they are necessary to identify the works being described. Also, the practice, traditional in Mendelssohn scholarship, of italicizing English words that appear in Mendelssohn's (originally) German-language letters is followed in this text.



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Editorial assistance was provided by John St James; and the task of proofreading was generously undertaken by Bruce Surtees, David Krupka and Karen Ages. Last but not least, I would like to thank Drew Mather for suggesting the topic of this book to me five years ago.



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General Editor's Series Preface

Music in nineteenth-century Britain has been studied as a topic of musicology for over two hundred years. It was explored widely in the nineteenth century itself, and in the twentieth century grew into research with strong methodological and theoretical import. Today, the topic has burgeoned into a broad, yet incisive, cultural study with critical potential for scholars in a wide range of disciplines. Indeed, it is largely because of its interdisciplinary qualities that music in nineteenth-century Britain has become such a prominent part of the modern musicological landscape.

This series aims to explore the wealth of music and musical culture of Britain in the nineteenth century and surrounding years. It does this by covering an extensive array of music-related topics and situating them within the most up-to-date interpretative frameworks. All books provide relevant contextual background and detailed source investigations, as well as considerable bibliographical material of use for further study. Areas included in the series reflect its widely interdisciplinary aims and, although principally designed for musicologists, the series is also intended to be accessible to scholars working outside of music, in areas such as history, literature, science, philosophy, poetry and performing arts. Topics include criticism and aesthetics; musical genres; music and the church; music education; composers and performers; analysis; concert venues, promoters and organizations; the reception of foreign music in Britain; instrumental repertoire, manufacture and pedagogy; music hall and dance; gender studies; and music in literature, poetry and letters.

Although the nineteenth century has often been viewed as a fallow period in British musical culture, it is clear from the vast extent of current scholarship that this view is entirely erroneous. Far from being a 'land without music', nineteenth-century Britain abounded with musical activity. All society was affected by it, and everyone in that society recognised its importance in some way or other. It remains for us today to trace the significance of music and musical culture in that period, and to bring it alive for scholars to study and interpret. This is the principal aim of the Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain series – to advance scholarship in the area and expand our understanding of its importance in the wider cultural context of the time.

Bennett Zon
Durham University, UK



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Chapter 1

Music in the Metropolis, 1829

But in one respect we Germans have an advantage here: everybody thinks that all of us were born smoking a pipe and owning a piano, and every German is *a priori* musical.

– Carl Klingemann, writing to the Mendelssohn family from London,
7 December 1827¹

On 21 April 1829, a seasick Felix Mendelssohn arrived at London's docks after a difficult crossing from Hamburg. No doubt the young musician was pleased to be greeted by his childhood friend Carl Klingemann, a diplomat posted to England, and by his former piano teacher Ignaz Moscheles, who had relocated to London four years earlier. At the age of 20 Mendelssohn had embarked upon a European tour: a series of voyages intended for his general education, for the cultivation of his musical taste and, at his father's urging, to help him decide upon a suitable location to establish his career. Mindful of his father's advice, the young composer-pianist set about learning all he could about life in England, and seven months passed before he embarked upon his journey homeward.

What did he find? Simply put, he found a musical culture unlike anything in continental Europe: a complex mixture of novelty and tradition, extravagance and frugality, pride and humility, cosmopolitanism and provincialism, openness and exclusion. However, to offer a more thorough answer to this question – to explore the musical life of London in 1829 as Mendelssohn did – will require more than a few words.

In 1829, the Duke of Wellington was prime minister, the last in a line of Tory politicians who had governed almost without interruption for nearly half a century. Yet despite the conservative stance of the governing party, throughout the 1820s there was a halting movement towards liberalization: the number of capital offences was greatly reduced; restrictions on trade unions were loosened; and Roman Catholics were granted civil rights, after much debate, just eight days before Mendelssohn's arrival. Abolitionists were gaining strength in their battle against slavery; and demands for the modernization of Britain's antiquated electoral system were voiced by Whig legislators. These demands would culminate in the Great Reform Act of 1832.

Economically, England had emerged from a difficult adjustment to a peacetime economy immediately following the Napoleonic Wars, and was enjoying a period

¹ George R. Marek, *Gentle Genius: The Story of Felix Mendelssohn* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972), p. 157.

of growth and prosperity. Decades of industrialization had left their mark on the nation: factories spewed forth manufactured goods of all kinds, and the country was crisscrossed with canals. Railroads were in their infancy: in 1829, Robert Stephenson's Rocket reached the dizzying speed of 29 miles per hour at the Rainhill Trials.

On the throne, the House of Hanover had reigned for 115 years: George IV, king at the time of Mendelssohn's visit, had been named Prince Regent in 1811 and was crowned in 1820. He cared little for politics, and in the Indian summer of Georgian England, his luxurious, hedonistic lifestyle set the tone for London's high society. Nevertheless, he left a distinctive and lasting mark on the culture of his kingdom. In 1823, he donated his father's vast collection of books to the British Museum Library, substantially increasing the museum's collection. He lent his name and influence to the establishment of new cultural institutions: the Royal Academy of Music in 1822, the National Gallery in 1824 and King's College London in 1829. And with George IV's support, the architect John Nash undertook such grand projects as Regent Street and Regent's Park in London, and also the Royal Pavilion in Brighton. However, when the king commissioned Nash to remodel Buckingham Palace in 1826, the renovation bogged down with rising costs, and was incomplete at the king's death in 1830.

During the reign of George IV, the arts enjoyed a period of expansion. By the 1820s the romantic literary movement was in full bloom: literate English people (about half of the population) read Byron, Shelley, Lake District poets and especially Scott. And although it was not an age that produced enduring playwrights, the theatre was enormously popular. In London, the Drury Lane, Covent Garden and Haymarket theatres held royal patents for the staging of plays; and following the opening of the Royal Coburg (now the Old Vic) in 1818, numerous small, unpatented theatres sprang up. Another theatrical art form, ballet – viewed in England as exotically foreign – attracted public interest in 1829, when the Italian–Swedish ballerina Marie Taglioni danced in London.

The capital of Great Britain and the British Empire had grown to become the largest city in Europe, with a population of about 1.5 million. (By comparison, Mendelssohn's Berlin had about 240,000 inhabitants.) London was a cosmopolitan city, with a substantial Irish population, a variety of European émigrés, small enclaves of Africans, Indians and Chinese, and also a thriving Jewish community. In the 1820s, the city's infrastructures were expanded to meet the demands of commerce and the growing population: Regent's Canal was completed in 1820; St Katherine's Docks, capable of servicing 1400 ships per year, opened in 1828; the construction of a new London Bridge was begun in 1824 and finished in 1831; and in 1825, the first excavations were made for the ambitious Thames Tunnel, which took 18 years to build. Yet London's citizens did not share equally in the benefits of the era, and off the bright, gas-lit thoroughfares were some of the most squalid slums in the world. The close proximity of wealth and poverty led to crime, and to address this problem the Metropolitan Police Force was created in June 1829.

The complexity, intensity and sheer size of London were described by Mendelssohn in a letter to his family from England, dated 25 April 1829:

It is fearful! It is mad! I am quite giddy and confused. London is the grandest and most complicated monster on the face of the earth. How can you compress into one letter what I have experienced in the last three days! I hardly remember the chief events, and yet I dare not keep a diary, for then I should have to see less of life, and that I do not wish. On the contrary, I wish to take everything that offers itself. Things toss and whirl about me as if I were in a vortex, and I am whirled along with them.²

Despite Mendelssohn's dismissal of the idea of keeping a diary, it was not long before he needed one to keep track of his many appointments. As well, in subsequent letters home he recorded picturesque accounts of his experiences.

In documenting his visit, Mendelssohn was by no means alone. England had a long tradition of attracting Europe's finest musicians, and in the 1820s many foreign composers and performers travelled to London, some of whom wrote letters, articles and memoirs about their experiences. In 1820, Louis Spohr brought his violin and his newfangled conductor's baton to London, dazzling the public as both a performer and an orchestra leader, and later documenting his visit in his autobiography. The following year Moscheles first appeared in London; in 1825, he settled in the city, and his letters offer much insight into the times. When Gioachino Rossini arrived in 1823, he sang duets with the king and charged £50 to appear at private soirées.³ Two years later, he satirized the un-musicality of the English aristocracy in his *Il viaggio a Reims*. (The opera's English character, Lord Sydney, proudly states he only knows one song: 'God Save the King'.) And in 1826, despite ill health, Carl Maria von Weber conducted the premiere of his *Oberon* at Covent Garden. In letters he wrote of the progress of his opera, while in his diary he documented the progress of the tuberculosis that ended his life two months after *Oberon* opened.

Of particular value are the writings of François Fétis. Belgian by birth, Fétis moved to Paris in 1818, where he pursued a career as a teacher, critic, theorist and music historian. In 1829, he visited England and wrote a series of eight letters about the state of music in London, publishing them in his own periodical, *La Revue musicale*. Subsequently, they also appeared in translation in the London music journal *The Harmonicon*, along with editorial annotations that often challenge Fétis's statements. In these letters Fétis commented on many aspects of music in England, including opera, instrumental music, choral music, church music and music education; and he also addressed the status of English composers. As well, in his letters he remarked upon two conversations with Mendelssohn,

² G. Selden-Goth (ed. and trans.), *Felix Mendelssohn: Letters* (New York: Klaus Reprint Co., 1969), p. 44.

³ Stella Margetson, *Regency London* (London: Cassel and Company, 1971), p. 135.

whom he called ‘a young and highly distinguished German composer’.⁴ Despite inaccuracies, omissions and what *The Harmonicon* suggested were biased, pro-French opinions, Fétis’s letters reveal much about the London of 1829.

Many writers – both English and foreign – who addressed the subject of music in England at this time remarked on a peculiar state of affairs: while Paris and Vienna competed for the title of ‘musical capital of Europe’, London, so far as musical composition was concerned, could not hold a candle to either. Yet if England at this time lacked composers of high repute, the nation enjoyed a varied culture of musical performance. In this respect, London was the equal of any continental city.

Amongst the musical arts, opera stood at the pinnacle of artistic prestige. The principal venue for opera was the King’s Theatre (home of the Royal Italian Opera), one of the largest opera houses in the world, with capacity for 2500 patrons. A variety of amenities and prices made it possible for a range of social classes to attend: a private box could cost as much as £300 per season;⁵ but admission to the lower gallery for 5s put a night at the opera within reach of the bourgeoisie.⁶ English operas and foreign operas in translation were also performed at the Covent Garden and Drury Lane theatres.

In the 1820s, the operas of Rossini dominated the King’s Theatre repertoire, with works by Pacini, Mercadante, Zingarelli, Meyerbeer, Spontini and others also staged. Some of the finest singers in the world – including Henrietta Sontag, Giuditta Pasta and Maria Malibran – competed for the public’s admiration. Mendelssohn heard Malibran on his first evening in London, in a performance of Rossini’s *Otello* at the King’s Theatre. In a letter home, he acknowledged her ‘very clever embellishments’, but complained that in the final act she expired, ‘gasping and screaming disgustingly’.⁷ The young composer was attracted to the lyric theatre, but his professional interests lay elsewhere: in London’s public and private concerts.

In 1829, London could boast a large number of concerts taking place day and night; and while ‘the season’ (from Easter to July, while Parliament was in session) was the traditional time for concert-going, performances took place throughout most of the calendar year. The chief venues for these events were the city’s concert or assembly rooms, in the fashionable West End. Unlike many concert halls today, with tiered rows of affixed seating, London’s concert rooms were flexible, multi-purpose facilities: with flat floors and furnishings that could be easily moved or removed, they were designed to accommodate a variety of musical performances, as well as dancing and other activities.

⁴ ‘State of Music in London, by M. Fétis (Fifth Letter)’, *The Harmonicon* 7/10 (1829): 242.

⁵ Margetson, p. 76.

⁶ Theodore Fenner, *Opera in London: Views of the Press, 1785–1830* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1994), p. 87.

⁷ G. Selden-Goth, p. 46.

The oldest concert venue in George IV's London was the great room of Willis's (originally Almack's) Rooms in King Street, St James. When the great room opened its doors in 1767 it was decorated to appeal to refined tastes, 'with columns and pilasters, classic medallions and mirrors'.⁸ At Willis's, lavish soirées of dining, dancing and card playing were organized by a socially powerful committee of aristocratic ladies, who strictly limited admission to about 800 select members.⁹ Here, London's debutantes' ball took place every year; and here, in 1812, the waltz was introduced into English society. Concerts in the Great Room were presented by Johann Christian Bach and Karl Friedrich Abel (the Bach–Abel Concerts) from 1768 to 1773; and in 1792, a series of vocal concerts was initiated by the singer Samuel Harrison, continuing intermittently until 1821. By 1829, the great room had no regular concert series, but was often used for benefit concerts and private events.

The Hanover Square Rooms could also claim a long and prestigious history. Located on the east side of fashionable Hanover Square, this suite of rooms was renovated as a concert venue in 1774 by a consortium of impresarios including Bach, Abel and the Swiss dancing master Andrea Gallini. The concert room could comfortably accommodate 500 people,¹⁰ and when it opened in 1775 its decor included a statue of Apollo and paintings by Gainsborough. Bach and Abel brought their concert series to Hanover Square in the rooms' inaugural year, while Gallini entertained audiences with masquerades and balls.¹¹ In the 1790s, the rooms were home to Johann Salomon's concerts, which offered the latest Haydn symphonies, directed from the keyboard by the esteemed Austrian composer himself. As well, in 1804, the Concert of Antient Music took up residence in the Hanover Square Rooms, remaining there until the society's demise in 1848.¹²

The Argyll Rooms, which opened in 1806 at the corner of Oxford and Argyll streets, became in 1813 the concert venue of the newly formed Philharmonic Society. In 1819, this suite of rooms was demolished to accommodate the construction of Regent Street; but a new building, retaining the name Argyll Rooms, was built by John Nash in 1820. The concert room in the new structure could hold 800 people, and was described in *The Annals of Fine Arts* as:

a parallelogram, elongated at one end by the orchestra, and at the other end by four tiers of boxes. The side walls of this saloon are decorated by fluted

⁸ Robert Elkin, *The Old Concert Rooms of London* (London: Edward Arnold, 1955), p. 75.

⁹ James Grant, *The Great Metropolis* (New York: Saunders & Otley, 1837), pp. 1–64. Even for aristocrats, admission to Almack's could be a challenge: the Duke of Wellington was once denied entry because he arrived five minutes late.

¹⁰ Simon McVeigh, *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 57.

¹¹ Charles Sanford Terry, *John Christian Bach*, 2nd edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967), p. 140.

¹² Elkin, p. 89.

pilasters of the Corinthian order, and the apertures to the orchestra and boxes are terminated by four majestic columns of the same description. The cornice is ornamented by modillions, the ceiling arched, forming the segment of a circle, and enriched with octangular Mosaic panels, and with large embossed flowers on each panel.¹³

It was in Nash's Argyll Rooms that Spohr, Weber and a 12-year-old Franz Liszt appeared, and it was here that Mendelssohn's music was first publicly performed in England. Like all of London's assembly rooms, the Argyll Rooms were used for many purposes besides music: theatrical performances, private parties and the annual Cyprians' (that is, courtesans') Ball all took place there.¹⁴ The building was destroyed by fire in 1830.

As well, other venues were used for concert performances. Following renovations in 1829, the King's Theatre was described by *The Harmonicon* as the 'the finest [room] in London for music', although the journal went on to catalogue a number of flaws.¹⁵ Here, operatic excerpts figured prominently in concerts presented by the management of the Royal Italian Opera, and benefit concerts were also given. Outside the fashionable West End, musical performances also took place at the Guildhall, the Freemasons' Tavern and the City of London Tavern. (Exeter Hall in the Strand, which was to become a prominent venue for Mendelssohn's oratorios, was under construction at the time of the composer's first visit to England.)

London's 'rage for concerts' of the 1790s subsided somewhat in the first decade of the nineteenth century. In 1813, however, public interest in concert music was renewed through the creation of the Philharmonic Society by a group of 30 professional musicians, both native-born and foreigners established in London. Amongst the signatories to the Society's constitution were Johann Salomon, by then an impresario of much experience; Muzio Clementi, the pianist, composer and piano manufacturer; the organist Thomas Attwood; the music publisher Vincent Novello; the conductor George Smart, then recently knighted by the Lord Lieutenant of Ireland; Ludwig Berger, who later gave musical instruction to Mendelssohn in Berlin; and William Ayrton, who subsequently served as music director of the Royal Italian Opera and as editor of a musical journal, *The Harmonicon*.

The rules of the Philharmonic were high-minded and egalitarian: there would be no distinction of social rank within the orchestra, and the repertoire would consist of 'the best and most approved instrumental music'.¹⁶ Concertos and solo

¹³ Ibid., p. 116.

¹⁴ Margetson, p. 75.

¹⁵ 'Concerts in the Great Room of the King's Theatre', *The Harmonicon* 7/6 (1829): 145.

¹⁶ Cyril Ehrlich, *First Philharmonic: A History of the Royal Philharmonic Society* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 4.

pieces, deemed meretricious, were initially forbidden, although chamber music was admitted to programmes. (There was not yet such a thing as a public chamber-music series per se in London.) The Philharmonic had no permanent conductor or music director, and – Spohr’s 1820 appearance as a sole, baton-wielding *maestro* notwithstanding – the orchestra’s performances were led by a group of co-directors, whose duties shifted from one concert to another. During concerts, a ‘leader’ at the head of the violin section and a ‘conductor’ who assisted from the piano jointly guided the orchestra through performances. (This practice was described by Fétis as ‘ancient’.)¹⁷

From the outset, the Society displayed an interest in new and recently composed works, famously commissioning Beethoven’s Symphony No. 9 in 1825 for the sum of £50. Also from the outset, programming was strongly inclined towards continental composers: in the 1820s, the symphonies of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven formed the backbone of the repertoire.¹⁸ In 1829 – the year in which the Philharmonic welcomed Mendelssohn – the orchestra played only a few pieces by English composers in its eight-concert season.¹⁹ However, a substantial portion of the musical public seems to have approved of the Society’s programming, and the Philharmonic saw its subscription list grow from 300 in 1813 to more than 700 by 1820.²⁰ In subsequent years, management capped the number of subscribers at 650.

The Concert of Antient Music, often called the Ancient Concerts, also presented an annual series of performances on a subscription basis. Established in 1776 by the fourth Earl of Sandwich for the performance of works at least 20 years old, the society was initially made up of aristocratic amateur musicians, although hired professional musicians increasingly appeared in the Ancient Concerts’ performances. With the passage of time the repertoire grew ever more ancient: by the late 1820s, Mozart had been dead for more than three decades, yet he was heard only occasionally, and concerts continued to be dominated by the music of Handel. The directors did, however, show a willingness to present English composers from bygone eras, including Purcell, Arne, Avison, Boyce and others.²¹ The Ancient Concerts enjoyed the support at the highest levels of society: George IV, when Prince Regent, took a personal interest in the concerts, selecting the repertoire for

¹⁷ ‘State of Music in London, by M. Fétis (Second Letter)’, *The Harmonicon* 7/9 (1829): 215.

¹⁸ Ehrlich, Appendix 1.

¹⁹ Of the 80 works played in the Philharmonic’s 1829 season, only two were by native-born Englishmen: Robert Lindley’s *Concertante for Violin and Violoncello Obligato*, and Charles Nicholson’s *Fantasia*. In both cases, the composers also appeared as soloists in their works. As well, J.B. Cramer, who arrived in England as a three-year-old child and was regarded as naturalized, performed his Piano Concerto.

²⁰ Ehrlich, p. 14.

²¹ William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 256.

several programmes.²² Yet although officially esteemed, as the nineteenth century progressed the Ancient Concerts came to be viewed by some critics as increasingly marginal to London's musical life.²³ (The series was discontinued in 1848.)

London's two leading subscription-concert societies were intertwined in a relationship more complex than a simple rivalry. To be sure, both the Ancient Concerts and the Philharmonic Society had partisan supporters, and there were times when differences of class, aesthetics and ideology erupted into debate and controversy. This occurred, for example, in 1822, when members of the Ancient Concerts established the Royal Academy of Music, even as several professional musicians from the Philharmonic Society were planning a similar initiative.²⁴ Richard Mackenzie Bacon, editor of *The Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* (*QMMR*), denounced the directors of the new music school as 'an oligarchy almost self-created'.²⁵

However, to label the Concert of Antient Music aristocratic and elitist, and the Philharmonic Society bourgeois and democratic, is fair only as a generalization. Both societies enjoyed royal patronage, and drew their audiences, in varying degrees, from the spectrum of the 'upper classes': the high nobility down to the learned professions (but generally excluding businessmen).²⁶ To be sure, in governance they were markedly different: the Ancient Concerts were organized by a committee of noblemen who hired performers as needed; whereas the Philharmonic was a co-operative venture, run by professional musicians. Yet despite these seemingly opposing models, in day-to-day operations lines could be blurred, with some musicians performing for both societies. Even the deeply conservative pianist, composer and Oxford professor William Crotch – chosen by the 'oligarchy' as the first Principal of the Royal Academy – was for a time also an associate member of the Philharmonic Society.

²² J.A. Fuller Maitland, *English Music in the XIXth Century* (London: Grant Richards, 1902), p. 9.

²³ In 1831, an unsigned letter to *The Atlas* described the patrons of the Ancient Concerts as 'a coterie, isolated from the best musical society in London'. The anonymous writer added that 'the subscribers and the performers are mutually and heartily sick of one another, the former content with the distinction of being members, the latter solicitous only of their pay' (Ehrlich, p. 39).

²⁴ Howard Irving, *Ancients and Moderns: William Crotch and the Development of Classical Music* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 48.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 47–8.

²⁶ William Weber asserts that the Concert of Antient Music 'was "aristocratic" not just because it attracted a few peers, but because it gathered together a wide-ranging network of people from the gentry and the upper middle classes, who looked to noblemen as patrons and who aspired to participate in some manner in their social world' (Weber, p. 143). Cyril Ehrlich points out that, in 1813, the Philharmonic Society's 300 subscribers contained '60 persons of title: earls, viscounts, countesses, lords and ladies, the odd marquis and chevalier'. He adds, however, that in ensuing years the percentage of aristocrats declined (Ehrlich, p. 16).

Perhaps the chief similarity between the two societies was their practice of screening subscribers.²⁷ The Ancient Concerts maintained overtly class-based policies, restricting its audience to the aristocracy and gentry. The Philharmonic similarly vetted potential subscribers according to social status, but also according to their credentials as musical connoisseurs. Demand for subscriptions was such that the Philharmonic could afford to be selective: rejected applicants included General Bligh, Lady Pocock and several other ‘ladies of rank’, and regulations clearly stated that tickets were not transferable.²⁸

Benefit performances, already mentioned, were a staple of London’s concert life in the 1820s. At this time, however, only a few such events were benefit concerts in the modern sense of the term: charitable enterprises to raise money for a worthy cause. Rather, most benefit concerts were presented for the profit of the performing artists themselves, who stood to gain, or potentially lose, substantially through these ventures. Such performances became increasingly frequent and competitive during the 1820s: in 1828, up to 42 such concerts took place in London,²⁹ eclipsing the activities of the subscription-based musical societies. Many benefit concerts were grand occasions, featuring esteemed performers such as Moscheles and Sontag, and were presented in prestigious venues, or occasionally in private homes, with full orchestras and prominent assisting artists. (Musicians often appeared *gratis* at each other’s concerts.) And although the public was not formally screened or restricted, as at subscription concerts,³⁰ the customary ticket price of half a guinea and the tendency for these performances to take place during the working day discouraged all but the well-to-do from attending. The following review of a benefit concert presented by the well-known cellist Robert Lindley offers much insight into the nature of these performances:

At the Argyll Rooms, Friday, 18th April.

The overtures to the *Zauberflöte* and *Figaro* were given by a most efficient band. Mr Lindley played a new fantasia of his own composition, in an admirable manner; and together with his son and [the bassist] Dragonetti, Corelli’s favorite trio. Mr W. Lindley performed, with Mr Mori, a double concerto for violin and violoncello. [The pianist] Mr Cramer played, for the first time, his fantasia

²⁷ In the words of musicologist James E. Matthew, ‘To go [to the Ancient Concerts] with your money in your hand was no passport; your social position had to be as carefully vouched for as for a ball at Almack’s.’ (Irving, p. 32f.)

²⁸ Ehrlich, pp. 18–19.

²⁹ Simon McVeigh, ‘The Benefit Concert in Nineteenth-Century London: From “Tax on the Nobility” to “Monstrous Nuisance”’, Bennett Zon (ed.), in *Nineteenth Century British Music Studies*, vol. 1 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1999), p. 247.

³⁰ For Carl Maria von Weber’s benefit concert in 1826, 149 tickets were purchased by ‘named persons’, 111 were bought at London’s music shops, and 40 were sold at the door (Ibid., p. 247).

The Banks of the Liffey. [The violinist] Mr Spagnoletti led, and Sir G. Smart conducted.³¹

These concerts were not, however, universally admired: critics complained of under-rehearsed performances and unvaried repertoire.³² And when Mendelssohn organized a benefit concert in 1829 – jointly presented with Sontag, who received most of the credit for the event – he aspired to higher standards. ‘As regards the choice of the pieces’, he boasted in a letter to his family, ‘it will no doubt be the most brilliant of the season.’³³ (The concert, which took place at the Argyll Rooms, was credited by *The Harmonicon* for attracting ‘one of the most crowded audiences’ ever seen at a benefit performance.³⁴) In keeping with Mendelssohn’s gentlemanly status, the composer received no payment for his involvement: the 300 guineas raised went towards the relief of flood victims in Silesia.

As well, an abundance of private salons and soirées kept the wealthy entertained and London’s leading musicians busy. Indeed, private performances in fashionable homes became so frequent in the 1820s that one journalist described their proliferation as ‘the most important musical phenomenon of the times’; and their popularity led him to speculate that public concerts might ‘soon receive little or no general support’ from the upper classes.³⁵ In 1825, the *QMMR* offered the following description of these exclusive events:

Private concerts have less formality, less observation in them than public. The guests approach the instruments or the singer – lounge from room to room or on the staircases – converse, and come or go at pleasure, and with far more ease than can be accomplished in public rooms.³⁶

The following year, Weber penned a less flattering account of a musical party in London:

³¹ ‘Benefit Concerts’, *The Harmonicon* 6, June (1828): 142.

³² In 1828, the *QMMR* complained of benefit concerts at which ‘the public is allured to scrambling performances ... disgraceful to the musician, destructive of the art, and disgusting to the real amateur’ (*QMMR* 10/37: 90). And in 1829, Fétis remarked that many of London’s benefit concerts featured ‘an orchestra hastily assembled, and which has had no rehearsals’. Furthermore, he observed, the soloists were often ‘famous singers sinking under the fatigue of their uninterrupted labours, and who are obliged to continually repeat the same pieces’ (*The Harmonicon* 7, November: 279).

³³ G. Selden-Goth, p. 53.

³⁴ ‘Concert for the Relief of the Sufferers in Silesia’, *The Harmonicon* 7, August (1829): 204.

³⁵ ‘State of Music in London’, *QMMR* 7/26 (1825): 209.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 210.

At about half past ten I went to Lord Hertford's. God! What a crowd of people. A magnificent hall, 500–600 people there, all superbly turned out. Almost the whole Italian opera company, also [the castrato] Velluti, the famous [hornist] Puzzi, and a bass player, the equally famous Dragonetti. Finales were sung and so on, but nobody listened. The noise and chatter of the throng of people was appalling. There was an attempt to get a little quiet while I played, and about 100 people gathered interestedly about me. What they heard, God alone knows, because I didn't hear much. I thought busily of my 30 guineas and so kept patience. Eventually at two o'clock everyone went to supper, and I excused myself.³⁷

Moscheles also took a jaundiced view of the salon audiences, writing in 1822:

To make music in those stuffy, overcrowded rooms before a mostly ignorant audience affords nothing like the pleasure of the gatherings we artists enjoy! Thank God I never had to endure what happened to [the violinist] Lafont on one occasion; right in the middle of a piece he was tapped on the shoulder by the Duke of Devonshire who said, 'C'est assez, mon cher!' (That's enough, old chap.)³⁸

The tendency for England's upper classes to treat accomplished musicians as social inferiors was also remarked upon by Spohr, who wrote that performers at salons

were not permitted to join the company, but were shown into an adjoining room, where they would have to wait until the moment arrived when they were summoned to the apartments where the company was assembled before whom they were to play; their performance over, they had to leave the room again immediately.³⁹

There are even accounts of private concerts where it was customary to draw a velvet rope across the room to separate the musicians from the invited guests.⁴⁰

When Mendelssohn – already an experienced *saloniste*, thanks to the musical events that often took place in his family's Berlin home – attended a soirée at Devonshire House, he documented no indignities, only his surprise in meeting the Duke of Wellington and Robert Peel on the stairway. However, Mendelssohn

³⁷ John Warrack, *Carl Maria von Weber* (London, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1976), p. 354.

³⁸ Emil F. Smidak, *Isaak-Ignaz Moscheles: The Life of the Composer and His Encounters with Beethoven, Liszt, Chopin and Mendelssohn* (Aldershot: Scholar Press, 1989), p. 28.

³⁹ Louis Spohr, *Louis Spohr's Autobiography* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1969), 2, p. 88.

⁴⁰ The Mendelssohn biographer George R. Marek has suggested that in London Mendelssohn 'must have been told the story of how in the great houses the musicians were divided from the guests by a cord stretched across the room. One night the bass, Luigi Lablache, let this cord down and no one had sufficient nerve or rudeness to put it up again. The practice fell into disuse.' Marek, p. 196.

attended as a gentleman, not as a musician, and was therefore treated as a social equal with the other guests. For the musicians paid to perform at these events, things were different: at one London soirée Mendelssohn noticed Malibran ‘in a remote corner of the drawing-room, shut out and looking miserable’.⁴¹

Unfortunately, it is difficult to establish exactly what took place at many salons, as they were rarely discussed in the musical press. A noteworthy exception was a private concert at Northumberland House, anonymously reviewed in *The Harmonicon* in 1828:

May 28th: I am happy to be able to add to my diary for this month, that not the Duchess of St Albans only, but also the Duchess of Northumberland – one of the most accomplished women of the age, whose example ought, and will, influence such of the upper ranks as are not morally blind, as well as deaf, to good music, – has given a concert, the annexed programme of which shows that Madame This, Signor That and the Countess of T’other, did not make the selection. It is what may be called an English concert, though half of the music is German, with only one piece in it that ought not to have been introduced, and it was performed by her Grace’s countrymen and countrywomen.⁴²

The repertoire was reported as follows:

Act I

Glee double choir, ‘Thy voice, O Harmony!’	<i>Webbe</i>
Song, MISS F. AYRTON, ‘Bid me discourse’	<i>Bishop</i>
Notturmo, <i>Harp, Piano-Forte, and Horns</i> , MISS KRUMPHOLTZ, MR CRAMER & C	<i>Cramer and Dussek</i>
Song, MR BRAHAM, arranged by	<i>Cramer</i>
Glee, ‘The Rose of the valley’	<i>W. Knyvett</i>
Song, MISS WILKINSON, ‘O bid your faithful Ariel’	<i>Linley</i>
Fantasia, Piano Forte, MR CRAMER	<i>Cramer</i>
Song, MR BRAHAM, ‘O I can bear my fate no longer’	<i>Weber</i>
Glee, ‘When winds breathe soft’	<i>Webbe</i>

Act II

Glee, ‘Here in cool grot’	<i>Lord Mornington</i>
Duet, MRS KNYVETT AND MR VAUGHAN, ‘The manly heart’	<i>Mozart</i>
Fantasia, Flute, MR NICHOLSON	<i>Nicholson</i>
Cantata, MR VAUGHAN, <i>Alexis (Violoncello)</i> , MR LINLEY)	<i>Dr Pepusch</i>

⁴¹ Eduard Devrient, *My Recollections of Felix Mendelssohn-Bartholdy, and His Letters to Me*, trans. Natalia Macfarren (London: Richard Bentley, 1869), p. 77. Also cited in Paul Jourdan, ‘Mendelssohn in England 1829–37’, PhD diss. (Cambridge University, 1998), p. 88.

⁴² ‘Extracts from the Diary of a Dilettante’, *The Harmonicon* 6, July (1828): 154.

Duet, Miss F. AYRTON and Mr BRAHAM, 'When thy bosom'	<i>Braham</i>
Glee, <i>The Midge's Dance</i> , Scotch air, harmonized by	<i>W. Knyvett</i>
Trio, <i>Harp, Piano Forte and Flute</i> , Miss KRUMPHOLTZ, MESSRS CRAMER and NICHOLSON	<i>Bochsa</i>
Song, Miss STEPHENS, 'Sweet Bird' (<i>Flute</i> , Mr NICHOLSON)	<i>Handel</i>
Finale, 'Now is the month of Maying'	<i>Morley</i>

More than a dozen professional musicians were engaged to perform this programme of vocal and chamber music, including such prominent artists as the pianist John Baptist Cramer, the cellist 'Linley' (presumably Robert Lindley) and the flautist Charles Nicholson. Typically, the repertoire was light in style and predominantly modern, although the soirée concluded with a Handel song, 'Sweet Bird', and Thomas Morley's 1595 madrigal 'Now is the Month of Maying'.

For those unable to gain admission to subscription concerts, private salons or expensive benefit concerts, London offered an array of modestly priced musical events. In 1818, Smart founded the City Amateur Concerts, which continued to 1832 at the City of London Tavern, attracting middle-class audiences. Repertoire was similar to the Philharmonic Society's, although performed by a mixture of professional and non-professional musicians.⁴³ The City of London Tavern was used for other musical events as well, including an 1831 appearance by Nicolò Paganini. Moscheles thought the venue 'unworthy of a great artist', caustically adding, 'but it was all one to him, for he makes money there'.⁴⁴ Beginning in 1827, the Società Armonica presented an annual concert series at the Crown and Anchor Tavern, performing 'miscellaneous concerts' of orchestral, chamber and vocal repertoire for the bourgeoisie.⁴⁵ As well, the Vauxhall Gardens, and other pleasure gardens, such as Sadler's Wells and the Eagle Tavern, were open to anyone who could afford the admission fee of a few shillings. In the 1820s, the music director at Vauxhall, Henry Bishop, presented a varied repertoire – ancient and modern, vocal and instrumental, British and foreign – including Rossini operas, and his own compositions and arrangements.

In addition to public concerts, domestic music-making was a popular pastime amongst the upper and middle classes. During the 1820s, England's largest piano firm, John Broadwood and Sons, manufactured more than 1000 square and 400 grand pianos annually, many of which were sold into the homes of *haute bourgeois* families.⁴⁶ Demand for tutelage was strong, and many musicians supplemented their incomes through teaching: in 1829, Fétis reported that there were more than

⁴³ Fuller Maitland, p. 8.

⁴⁴ McVeigh, 'The Benefit Concert in Nineteenth-Century London', p. 263.

⁴⁵ Fuller Maitland, p. 12.

⁴⁶ Derek Adlam and Cyril Ehrlich, 'Broadwood', in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2nd edn (London: Macmillan, 2001), vol. 4, p. 411.

4000 private music instructors in London.⁴⁷ Noted the *QMMR* in 1827: ‘the private practice of the art is daily and hourly increasing, and, considered in the light of domestic gratification, music now contends with literature’.⁴⁸

An army of amateur musicians (often typified as the daughters of the bourgeoisie) was serviced by a burgeoning music publishing industry, and in the second decade of the nineteenth century a new generation of publishers sprang up: Samuel Chappell, Vincent Novello and Thomas Boosey – names still known in the musical world today – first issued titles in 1810, 1811 and 1816, respectively. Many other enterprising musicians, such as Cramer and Clementi, were involved in the music publishing trade, and a wide variety of editions were printed: everything from Novello’s series of Mozart and Haydn masses to easy piano versions of popular arias and songs.

In 1828, *The Athenaeum* caricatured the manner in which music was reduced to grist for the publishers’ mills:

No sooner is an opera out, but to instant work fall the legions of arrangers and adapters. Out comes *Semiramide*, arranged for the pianoforte; *Semiramide* arranged for the pianoforte and flute; *Semiramide* arranged for a single tiny flute; and for aught we know, *Semiramide* arranged for the French horn or the Jew’s-harp. This is not all! ... The Babylonian queen, for her misdeeds, is reserved for further torments, and must be *trodden under foot*. After having run the gauntlet of the arrangers and adapters, she receives the *coup de grâce* from the quadrille manufacturers.⁴⁹

Mendelssohn was well aware of the prominence and scope of London’s music publishing industry, and amongst his first appointments in London were meetings with Chappell, Collard and other music publishers.

Similarly, choral and church music were aspects of London’s musical culture that Mendelssohn encountered in 1829, and which in later years would become central to his career in England. In the realm of choral music, Handel’s honoured status was upheld by the concerts of the amateur Cecilian Society, and by the professional performances of oratorios in theatres during Lent, when opera performances were forbidden. As well, catches, glees, madrigals and other English part-songs both old and new were popular, leading Fétis to remark, ‘Were the whole of Europe to raise its voice against catches and glees, these pieces of national music would not be admired a whit the less by every true-born Englishman.’⁵⁰

The oldest choral society in London was the Madrigal Society, a men’s singing club founded in 1741, devoted primarily to English repertoire of the sort Fétis

⁴⁷ ‘M. Fétis on the State of Music in London (M. Fétis’s Eighth Letter)’, *The Harmonicon* 7, November (1829): 278.

⁴⁸ ‘State of Music in London’, *QMMR* 9/33, p. 91.

⁴⁹ ‘The Italian Opera – King’s Theatre’, *The Athenaeum*, no. 4 (1828): 60.

⁵⁰ ‘M. Fétis’s Third Letter’, *The Harmonicon* 7, August (1829): 184.

described.⁵¹ But there were other similar groups as well, and as with many other aspects of the city's culture, class was a governing factor in the organization of choral societies. The Noblemen and Gentlemen's Catch Club, founded in 1761 by a group of aristocrats who enjoyed singing and dining together, met fortnightly at Willis's Rooms. (Mendelssohn attended one of this club's meetings in 1829.)⁵² The Glee Club, similar to the Catch Club and dating from 1787, attracted a middle-class membership and often met at the Freemasons' Tavern. And the London Mechanics' Institution, created in 1823 to provide training in the skilled trades, soon also offered instruction in singing – a harbinger of the working-class choral movement that was to grow to enormous proportions in the Victorian era.⁵³

As for London's church music, the leading figure of the day was Thomas Attwood, the organist at St Paul's Cathedral. A student of Mozart in Vienna in the 1780s, he was largely responsible for popularizing Mozart's music in England, and his own compositions bore the influence of his teacher. In 1829, he came to know and admire Mendelssohn, inviting him to play on the organ at St Paul's, and the two musicians became close friends. Attwood, however, also holds the dubious distinction of being the man who lost the original score of the *Midsummer Night's Dream* overture, accidentally leaving it in a hackney-cab. (Undaunted, Mendelssohn re-copied the piece from memory.)⁵⁴ Another prominent organist, Samuel Wesley, was at the end of his long career: by 1830, chronic depression forced him to withdraw almost entirely from public appearances.

No doubt there were many people in early nineteenth-century London who were indifferent, or even opposed, to musical pursuits. As well, there were also many people for whom musical performances were more a matter of social, rather than artistic, interest.⁵⁵ Yet without the support of a substantial, diverse and enthusiastic audience, the wealth of musical activity in the 1820s could not have existed. 'England', stated a *QMMR* editorial in 1823, 'stands at least upon an equal eminence with any of the kingdoms of the world in its desire of possessing the highest examples of [musical] art.'⁵⁶

What, then, was wrong with this picture? In the opinion of several contemporary observers, one of the nation's greatest musical problems was the lowly stature of English musicians in their own land. According to the *QMMR*, the popularity of

⁵¹ Fuller Maitland, p. 12.

⁵² Jourdan, p. 76.

⁵³ Henry Raynor, *Music and Society since 1815* (New York: Schocken Books, 1976), p. 94.

⁵⁴ David Gedge, 'The Amiable Mr Attwood (Part II)', *Musical Opinion* 107/1277 (1984): 164.

⁵⁵ In 1829, *The Harmonicon* pointedly remarked that 'at private concerts – for such only are fashionable – the proportion of those who understand what is going on, is not more than one in ten at the utmost' ('Notes on the Eighth Letter of M. Fétis', *The Harmonicon* 7, November, p. 280).

⁵⁶ 'Sketch of the State of Music in London', *QMMR* 5/18 (1823): 241.

continental musicians had rendered the prospects of English musicians particularly bleak by the late 1820s, and conditions showed no signs of improving:

The direction which the cultivation and patronage of music in England have for some years taken towards foreign composition and foreign artists would seem to have reached its consummation this season in London, were it not that as the knowledge of the encouragement and reward so impartially bestowed upon pretension as well as merit of all sorts diffuses itself in distant countries, new competitors rush in to claim their share.⁵⁷

Indeed, the warm reception accorded to Mendelssohn in England throws into high relief the disparity between native and foreign musicians. Within a month of his arrival, this young, almost unknown composer successfully negotiated a performance of his Symphony No. 1 Op. 11 by the Philharmonic Society, whereas an English composer of this era might reasonably have despaired of ever gaining such an opportunity.

The domination of London's concerts by foreign repertoire could hardly be ignored, but critics who wrote on the subject were by no means unanimous in their explanations for the phenomenon. Broadly speaking, they fell into two camps: those who believed England simply had no native composers comparable to the best continental talents; and those who felt that English composers were as good as foreigners (or could be, if offered sufficient encouragement and opportunity), but were largely ignored by a musical public prejudiced against them. Representative of this latter group was 'A Strict Timeist', an anonymous writer whose essay 'Foreign Instruction and English Judgment' was published in the *QMMR* in 1826:

With respect to composition, there is some truth and more falsehood in what is said about English genius England is neither without composers of originality and merit, nor without variety of production, equaling the continent in all species but one – namely opera, and even in operatic music the fault lies not so much with the composers as with the taste of the public, which is still kept down to 'a jargon of dialogue and song'⁵⁸

By contrast, the view that England's composers were inferior to foreigners appears frequently in the critical literature of this era. Another anonymous writer, signing himself 'An Observer' in the *QMMR* in 1824, was scathing in his attack on contemporary English sacred music: 'It is painful to reflect, that he, who would maintain the honour of his country in respect to the compositions for her church, must revert to those of past times, for at present we produce nothing, absolutely nothing.'⁵⁹ On the subject of English opera composers, this correspondent was no

⁵⁷ 'Sketch of the State of Music in London', *QMMR* 10/39 (1828): 275.

⁵⁸ 'Foreign Instruction & English Judgement', *QMMR* 8/32 (1826): 406.

⁵⁹ 'The Present State of Music in England', *QMMR* 6/23, (1824): 282.

less dismissive: ‘Of the theatrical composers of our time, it may suffice to observe, that their productions are beneath criticism.’⁶⁰ A similarly broad disdain for English orchestral music can be found in the pages of *The Athenaeum*, which stated, in 1828, that native composers had produced ‘few orchestral pieces of merit’.⁶¹

Both sides of this debate drew upon the collapse of the British Concerts – a concert society founded in London in 1823 to present works by native composers – to support their arguments. The society failed after just one season, and a writer for the *QMMR* attributed this to a shameful lack of support from the aristocracy:

The subscription, it will be recollected, was for three concerts, and limited to 200 names. Amongst them, to the discredit of the British nobility, we lament to say we find no more than eight titled persons, only one of whom belongs to the peerage. This is not an invidious remark, for the fortunes of the great and noble are ... a trust to be worthily applied, and a part of the discharge of that trust is – the support of art, and of native art especially.⁶²

The Harmonicon, however, took a different view, and began by expressing ‘very serious doubts’ about the wisdom of an exclusively British concert series.⁶³ Continuing, the essayist (probably Ayrton himself) scolded English composers for their lack of success:

[D]oes any rule exist in the Philharmonic Society, which shuts the door of that institution against English compositions? Quite the contrary, for every encouragement, every facility, is there given indiscriminately, to native and foreign professors, to tempt them to make trial of their strength. Besides this, the English theatres, the numerous benefit concerts, and the many provincial meetings, are all open to the artist who is gifted with a talent for original composition: if he will not avail himself of these opportunities, he alone is to blame, and not the existing institutions of his country The inference then that we draw from the foregoing is not that native talent for musical composition is discouraged in England, but that at present it does not abound⁶⁴

Those critics who held foreign composers superior to England’s offered various theories to account for the relative weakness of English composition. Fétis, in his series of 1829 essays, catalogued a litany of faults, shortcomings and obstacles in England’s musical culture – everything from a ‘dull and heavy climate ... little favourable to imagination’, to an aristocracy that ‘possesses all the wealth, and

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 284. The author does, however, allow an exception for Henry Bishop, ‘one of the finest dramatic musicians who have appeared in England’.

⁶¹ ‘Public Amusements’, *The Athenaeum*, no. 12 (1828): 186.

⁶² ‘Sketch of Music in London’, *QMMR* 5/18 (1823):245.

⁶³ ‘British Concerts’, *The Harmonicon* 1/4 (1823): 58.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

employs it without discernment'.⁶⁵ Approaching the problem historically, Fétis suggested that the anti-musicality of Cromwell's Puritans in the seventeenth century was 'the original and active cause of the fall of the art in general'.⁶⁶ And commenting on the status of England's composers in 1829, he wrote of benighted men who considered 'the exercise of their art as a means of existence or of fortune, and not as the path to glory'.⁶⁷

Moreover, Fétis underscored what he perceived as a lack of good composition teachers and instructional facilities. 'With the exception of a Frenchman of the name of Jousse', he remarked, 'there does not exist in London a single professor who has just notions of counterpoint, fugue and the other parts of the art of writing'.⁶⁸ For Fétis, education was the solution to England's problems, and he argued that the superiority of continental composers was the result of better systems of musical instruction:

The happy disposition of the people of Italy for music was productive of no sensible effect till the period when the multiplication of schools afforded the means of developing all the faculties of the nation. Though less happily organized, the inhabitants of northern Germany have cultivated music with great success for nearly the space of three centuries because their education is altogether musical. In France one single well-organized school has triumphed over the most unfavourable circumstances, and raised music to the highest point of perfection, though at one time it seemed decided by the general voice that the French had none of the qualities necessary for the cultivation of this art.⁶⁹

As well, there were English writers who attempted to diagnose their nation's musical ailments. Like Fétis, *The Athenaeum* compared the state of affairs in England to a continental model, focusing on the issue of patronage:

Some of our readers may not perhaps know that most of the petty German princes have bands military, or of violins etc. with a chorus, retained in their service, whose business is to meet daily for practice, and to play in their anterooms during

⁶⁵ 'M. Fétis on the State of Music in London (M. Fétis's Eighth Letter)', *The Harmonicon* 7, November (1829): 280.

⁶⁶ 'The State of Music in London, by M. Fétis (Letter the First)', *The Harmonicon* 7, August (1829): 182.

⁶⁷ 'M. Fétis on the State of Music in London (M. Fétis's Eighth Letter)', *The Harmonicon* 7, November (1829): 280.

⁶⁸ 'M. Fétis's Fourth Letter', *The Harmonicon*, 7, September (1829): 218. The editor of *The Harmonicon* took exception to this remark. In a footnote, he charged: 'The boldness of this assertion is really astounding, for, whether true or false, M. Fétis had no means whatever of ascertaining the fact.'

⁶⁹ 'The State of Music in London, by M. Fétis (Letter the First)', *The Harmonicon* 7, August (1829): 182.

their dinners, and also in the evening at their concerts or private theatres An aspirant either as poet or composer has no difficulty in obtaining a permission to present or have his composition performed to his noble patron, and thus it is that Germany abounds with so many highly gifted composers How many such bands are there in England? His Majesty has one, but, we believe, it consists only of wind instruments. We know not of any nobleman or prince who retains an orchestra of violins and voices.⁷⁰

What both the pro- and anti-English critics of the 1820s had in common was a self-conscious dissatisfaction with the state of England's musical culture, and a desire to see the situation improve. The pro-English camp expressed frustration at the public's refusal to acknowledge the worth (or potential worth) of native composers. Amongst the pro-continental faction there was disappointment that England's composers did not, in its estimation, measure up to those of Germany, Italy or even France. And both camps could point to the preferences of the concert-going public, which overwhelmingly favoured foreign composers, as proof of their respective positions.

Posterity has come to view the early nineteenth century as the nadir of English musical creativity. Such English composers as Bishop, Attwood and Crotch have fallen into obscurity – and even in their own time the musical public tended to dismiss them as *passé*. But it should not be forgotten that by the end of the 1820s musical Europe was in a state of flux, as the established principles of classicism were increasingly viewed as the values of a bygone era. Beethoven was dead, and with his death Vienna lost its dominant position in European music. Weber and Schubert had also passed away. A new generation of composers – Liszt, Chopin, Schumann, Berlioz and, of course, Mendelssohn – were taking their first steps, but had not yet established themselves as mature artists. For a highly talented composer from Germany, whose music embraced both the old and the new, London in 1829 offered a warm welcome and opportunities for professional success. Mendelssohn did not fail to take advantage of those opportunities.

⁷⁰ 'Public Amusements', *The Athenaeum*, no. 12 (1828): 186.



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