

LISTENING TO MUSIC: PEOPLE, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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Eighteenth-century musical listeners as revealed in the papers of James Harris

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Abstract

James Harris (1709–80) was an author of philosophical books about the interpretation of language. He was based at the family home in Salisbury until 1761, when he was elected as a Member of Parliament and thereafter divided his time between Salisbury and London. He was also an active amateur musician, as co-director of Salisbury's Musical Society and a harpsichord player who encouraged the musical talents of his family. During visits to London in the 1730s he attended Handel's performances, and his correspondence with the 4th Earl of Shaftesbury includes some of the most well-informed descriptions of their experiences. Particularly valuable, also, is the record of the concerts that Harris and his family attended (and sometimes presented) during the 1760s and 1770s, mostly private events for which there is no public record. A summary of these concerts is presented in an analytical table, as an Appendix to this chapter.

Introduction

James Harris (1709–80) came from a family of lawyers and land-agents, whose main family residence was in Salisbury Cathedral Close. He was known for his publications as a philosopher (as understood at the time); his most famous work, *Hermes*, received a somewhat controversial reception in England, but was influential in Germany during the second half of the eighteenth century.¹ His life has two main phases: following undergraduate study at Oxford University (without proceeding to a degree) he was resident in Salisbury until 1761, when he was elected Member of Parliament for Christchurch (Hants.); thereafter he divided his years between Salisbury and London, moving to the latter with his family for the periods of the Parliamentary sittings. His son James followed a diplomatic career, serving in Madrid, Berlin and St Petersburg, receiving a knighthood in 1779 and created Earl of Malmesbury in 1800. Fortunately, the family archives have been carefully preserved by his successors and are now deposited at the Hampshire Record Office. They first came to my attention on account of an important collection of manuscript copies of Handel's music and references to the composer in letters that were known from published extracts; further research revealed a rich collection of material on musical (as well as political and domestic) matters. With the generous co-operation of the sixth and seventh Earls of Malmesbury, Rosemary Dunhill and I were able to survey the archive for references to theatre and music during Harris's lifetime, which came to publication in 2002.²

Music was a major interest of the elder James Harris, and the Malmesbury papers provide much evidence, mainly from letters and diaries, of his activity as both a listener and a participant. He gave domestic concerts in Salisbury and in London; in Salisbury he was co-director of the Musical Society and the annual St Cecilia Festival. Salisbury music-making involved performers from elsewhere – from Oxford and Bath for the fortnightly Society meetings, and from London for the festivals;³ the Harris papers provide invaluable material about the arrangements with performers and also incidentally about music-making in other places, including Durham and Hertford. Although his son had little interest in music, his daughters performed; his younger daughter Louisa in particular took the matter seriously, learning the harp and seeking singing lessons from the Italian opera stars (*castrati*) in London. In the last phase of his life Harris was appointed Secretary to Queen Charlotte and his diaries, as well as including reports of the royal family's concerts, record an occasion when he played music by Handel on the harpsichord to King George III.⁴ Partly as a result of the employment of leading performers from London for the Salisbury Festival, Harris

developed social relationships with professional musicians. Fanny Burney recorded that at a London concert in 1775:

*We met Mr and Miss Louisa Harris there & while we were talking with them, most of the Performers in the Concert came up to them. They addressed us, & entered into conversation with the Harris's, who seem never so pleas'd as when Engag'd with the most eminent Singers & players.*⁵

For the Salisbury Festival in 1773, the visiting musicians received hospitality from the Harris household, an occasion engagingly described by Elizabeth Harris (James's wife):

*Our orchestra was chiefly Germans save one Spaniard nam'd Ximenes, two Italians Grassi and Storace. They all lik'd our table; we had them three days and ... your father was enabled to give them variety of good wines, to which the Germans shew'd no dislike. Fischer [oboe player] was so pleas'd with your Tinto di Rota that I fear'd his head might have been disorder'd but that was my ignorance, for both him and [J. C.] Bach have heads as strong again as our squires. I must do them justice to say never people behav'd better.*⁶

Listening experiences described in the Harris papers

Diaries and correspondence of this period typically reveal little about the reaction of listeners to the music they heard. More frequently it is social details of performances that are recorded, such as comments on the venue and the audience, and names of performers. While evaluations of performers are sometimes found, only rarely do the sources convey reactions to the music that was played and sung. However, one document among the Malmesbury papers clearly stands out from the rest for the detail that it contains about the musical experience. A letter from the Earl of Shaftesbury to James Harris on 18 January 1737, following his attendance at the first night of a Handel opera at Covent Garden theatre includes:

I was at Arminius last Saturday where I had the pleasure to meet many of our musical friends. Sir Wyndham Knatchbull was of the number & I think looks very well. Mr Handel has a much larger

orquestre (I know not how to spell that word) than last year & the loss of Castrucio [violinist/leader] is abundantly supplied by Martini [oboe player] who plays immediately above Clegg where Castrucio us'd to sit. The overture is a very fine one & the fuge I think as far as I can tell at once hearing not unlike to that in Admetus; it (the overture) ends with a minuet strain. The first song is a duet between Annibali [castrato singer] & Strada [soprano] & is but short, but like the whole piece in every respect excellent & vastly pleasing.

To tell you my real opinion of Annibali I found him widely different from the idea I had conceiv'd of him but it was on the right side that I was mistaken for he prodigiously surpass'd my expectations. His voice it must be confess'd is not so good as some we have had; the lower noates of it are very weak & he has not the melowness of Senesino (nor as far as I can guess) the compass, but the middle part of it is clear strong & manly & very tunable. It must be owing to the songs in Porus being too low for him that my Couzin Hooper could imagine he sung out of tune, for though I did not hear him I will venture to contradict it, as he is by far a greater master of musick than any man I ever heard sing on a stage. He is as exact in his time as Caporali [cellist] who plays the base, though he sings with the greatest ease imaginable & his closes are superiour to them all (but Strada); he comes to them in the most natural rational way, always keeps within the air & scarce ever makes two alike throughout the opera. One is never in any pain about him, he enters so thoroughly into what he is about both as to action as well as the song. His action indeed is incomparable & he sings with all the passion his voice will admitt. – Upon the whole he pleases me the best of any singer I ever heard without exception.

I need but mention Strada's name, you know her excellencies. She has a charming part. As for Conti [castrato singer] he sings I think better than last year in that he keeps more within his voice. Martini has a solo upon the hautboy with only Conti singing to it. Indeed Martini exerts himself mightily through the whole opera. Beard has but two, though two too many, songs for he is absolutely good for nothing: Bertolli's & Negri's songs are

*pleasing firm compositions & they perform them extremely well.
The base has but one song.*

The opera is rather grave[,] but correct & labour'd to the highest degree & is a favourite one with Handel. The bases & accompaniment if possible is better than usual. But I fear 'twill not be acted very long. The Town dont much admire it. But as my father says 'Harmony is Harmony though all the world turn Goths', & I add, or fine gentlemen. This delightfull peice of musick will come out by the middle of next month at the same price to subscribers as Atalanta was & under Mr Handel's inspection. I am afraid I have tired you already but I cannot leave this agreeable subject without repeating my commendations of the opera: I think there is rather more variety & spirit in it than in any of the preceeding ones & tis admirably perform'd. There is a life & vigour in Annibali I am sure you will like. 'Experto credite quo turbine torqueat hastam?'⁷ may be applicable to him with regard to the vigour of his action. ... Most people (not Sir Wyndham, Mr Jennens &c) are of a quite different opinion as to Annibali &c from myself but when you come you will determine it.⁸

This account reveals much about the listening skills and overall musical abilities of both the author and the recipient of the letter. Although there is little evidence that Shaftesbury was a practicing musician, he clearly had the experience, aural awareness and vocabulary to communicate his experience. At this stage Harris and Shaftesbury were young men for whom music was a topic of discussion; Harris sent drafts of his 'Discourse on music, painting and poetry' for Shaftesbury's comments.⁹ Regrettably, little subsequent correspondence at this level survives from later years.

The context for listening in Harris's London

Undoubtedly Shaftesbury was one of the most articulate members of the London opera audience in 1737, and it is rare to have an insight of this quality into a listening experience. The nature and quality of the experiences among the audience as a whole remain something of a puzzle. Some idea of the membership of the eighteenth-century London audience can be gained from the subscription lists to published music. It is possible to imagine the relevance of the lists for publications of keyboard suites; technically the music might be challenging, but there would have been some point

to placing the music on the harpsichord for the purchaser's family to attempt, and the practical function of the published collections of two-stave arrangements of arias (for which there were no subscription lists) can similarly be understood. More curious are the subscription lists for full-score publications of music from Handel's operas and oratorios, with entries of names sometimes running to three figures. A handful of the names are of executant musicians or musical societies, but most are not. Even after vanity purchases (for personal libraries) and patronage (particularly to support the composer in difficult times) are taken into account, the puzzle remains: how did the purchasers understand or 'use' the musical notation printed in these expensive books, and how did they relate to the performances that they attended?

Beyond the rare records of musical experience, the Harris papers have some vivid reports of the circumstances in which listening took place, as for example Elizabeth Harris's description of a high-profile benefit concert in March 1779:

Louisa and I last night were in [the] most disagreeable croud I ever yett was in, at the Freemasons Hall. We went merely on principal to do creditt to Miss Harrupps benefitt: I not only admire her as one of the finest singers, but her behaviour is so decent and unaffected, that she ought to be encourag'd. There were a thousand people in the room, and by what I heard four hundred in the tea rooms, and two hundred sent away. Amidst this numerous meeting I saw very few people I had ever seen before. Such quarrelling among footmen and coachmen that it was impossible to gett away; it is a tavern with a long passage that was crouded by swearing footmen. The great room swarm'd with pick pockets; my neighbour Cox lost a fine gold snuff box, and many others had their different losses. The concert ended between ten and eleven, but it was one before we could gett away. We walk'd some way to the coach; no danger of pick pocketts in the street, they were all in the Freemasons Hall. There were fellows that cutt ladies pockets but we escap'd, though I was much alarm'd with the idea of having my pocket cutt, for fear they might cutt too deep. Never will I sett my foot again in Freemasons Hall. We never felt so happy as when we were clear of the coaches at the end of Long Acre. Miss Benson was if possible more alarm'd and fatigu'd than I was. We gott Mr Greenwood, and Mr Fulham by way of philanders, and brought them home in the coach with us.¹⁰

Clearly, in such a busy environment the listening experience was far removed from the ordered concert experience of modern audiences.

Other sections of this letter provide insights into the circumstances of private concerts of the period in London:

Tis said Miss Townshend was married to Mr Wilson at a fruit shop [unlicensed registry] in Town. ... That this man should gett admitted a subscriber to our most vertuous concert you will be astonish'd at: our great Lady and Governess clears herself by saying he came recommended by Mr Agar. Assoon as Wilson's character was known she most strictly desir'd all the young ladies not to speak to him; he will be expell'd as will Mr Agar.

Louisa has been greatly occupied in disposing of subscriptions for Rauzzini and Lamotte's concert [series]; she will raise them near two hundred guineas. It begins this evening.

The private concerts are also referred to in one of Elizabeth's letters from the previous year:

We never had so many private engagements as this year, so consequently we see little of the public diversions, except some times an opera. ...

Lamotte and Rauzzini's concert will begin Friday. I think they will have a good subscription, if all the books fill like Louisa's[;] she wants only four to make up a hundred. Those we hope to gett before Friday. The Duchess of Ancaster has a tolerable book, so has Lady Clarges, but Louisa has the greatest number. The Duchess of Chandos, Lady Craven, are gone [out] of Town so their books will be very small if any at all.

We had some music here last Thursday. Miss Bulls sung duetts finely, Lamotte playd delightfull, Louisa & Rauzzini sung vastly well, though he had a cold, and she was in the rheumatism.¹¹

More often, however, the Harris family's activity in London concert-going is only recorded through brief references, such as these entries in James Harris's diaries:

[1775] Paid Kemmeil his concert subscription for myself, wife and Louisa £9. 09. 0

Add Mr Ewer's half subscription to Bach £2. 12. 6

Wednesday March 17 [1779] Went to the House [of Commons] – came home early – went to Bach's concert;

Friday [19 March 1779] Went in the evening to our concert at Mrs Bohun's, & thence to Lady Arundel's assembly.¹²

As a record of listening experiences, most of the references are rather frustrating. They describe occasions and locations, and in diminishing quantity may note the names of the persons present and the performers (particularly if virtuosic or domineering), though rarely naming any of the music performed and virtually never providing any Shaftesbury-like appreciation of the quality or content of the music.¹³ As usual, there seems to be an inextricable mixture of musical and social motives involved in attendance, and there are complaints when the balance between them impaired the musical experience, as on one occasion in February 1779:

You should have a journal of our past actions, since last Tuesday. Wednesday we went to Baron Alvesleven's. By the way that concert is much improv'd; there I left Louisa under Mrs Morrisons wing, and went myself to the Fields. ... Friday was the Shab Rab, never was any thing so very shocking as [the way that] Kammell and the others accompanied Louisa's song. The opera being that night ... the best hands were oblig'd to be there, and a most sad concert we had. ... Last night we were at a concert at Lady Neuhavens, moderate enough as to music, but the crime of company who talk'd all the time, but when ladies were singing; they were Lady Cranborn, Lady Margaret Fordyce, Miss Graham, and Louisa.¹⁴

The last phrase is a reminder that both professional and amateur performers were involved with the private concerts; indeed, they gave the 'ladies' a forum for musical performance that would not have been socially acceptable at public events.

Given competent leading performers and good management, the private concerts seem to have run quite successfully, in particular those concert series that were under the management of performers. Some of these met in regular venues, though not

concert rooms, and some apparently rotated round the houses of a consortium of hosts. Occasions that passed without incident also passed without comment, but that was not always the case. Elizabeth anticipated trouble in February 1775:

We are going this evening to Lady Mary Forbes, where Louisa's harp is invited. That said harp is much in fashion. Saturday she exhibited at Sir Charles Cocks's, and Louisa and Gertrude sung duets, with great applause. I have no great expectation of much this evening, knowing the vivacity of the lady of the house to be too great, to attend herself, or lett any body else attend.¹⁵

Indeed her instinct was correct:

Lett me see, – I will recount our adventures from Teusday, when we attended the wildest meeting I ever assisted at before, at Lady Mary Forbes. It was design'd for a concert, one fiddle & a harpsicord composing the band; the good Lady herself, together with her green hat & candle screen, the strangest figure I ever saw, calling aloud for chorus's with one voice, trios without a bass & the like impossibilitys. Madame Deiden on the harpsicord & Louisa on the harp were the only reasonable performance's; the company was good, & were contented to spend four hours hearing this extraordinary concert. Wednesday we went to Bachs [concert] and Friday was kept in the usual way.¹⁶

On one occasion, also, Louisa Harris rescued a concert that was threatened by the unreliability of the principal performer:

We were all ask'd Sunday last to Lady Galways, to hear Tessier sing and play on the harp. We assembled soon after eight; a number of people of the highest fashion in Town were there. The harp was plac'd in the corner of the room and Tessier appear'd, but said he could not sing and went away imediately. There were performers enough for the purpose, and they made out something of a concert. Louisa went away in Sir Ralph Payne's coach, to fetch two songs, and Lady Stormont sung. Mrs Sheridan sung four songs, a finer voice was never heard [but] the learned say she has been ill taught. We are ask'd again next Sunday to Lady Galways, when Tessier has promis'd to read, but he is such a puppy, I have no confidence in him.¹⁷

Performances in London attended by the Harris family

The Appendix lists the concerts attended by members of the Harris family in London from 1761 to 1780, derived from references in the Harris papers, principally family correspondence (especially between Elizabeth Harris and her son) and James Harris's engagement diaries.¹⁸ The list inevitably gives an incomplete record on account of the uneven nature of the sources: family correspondence varied in frequency and content, and complete runs of James's diaries survive only from the years 1770–01 and 1775–79. Attention is also restricted to concerts, to the exclusion of other musical events such as operas and plays with incidental music; the annual concerts in support of the Fund for Decay'd Musicians (which took place in the opera house, and were based around the current opera singers) are included, but opera performances for the benefit of individual singers are not, since they were part of the annual opera programme.

Given the caveat about capricious survival of sources, the record nevertheless gives a good general idea of the family's concert-going activity. In the case of public concerts (listed in the Appendix under A1 and A2), the references in the Harris papers can be matched up with advertisements in the London newspapers and other contemporary sources. It seems that, as their social activity in London developed, the Harris family attended all of the known major concert series (A1), in particular those of Bach/Abel and Rauzini/Lamotte, and indeed Louisa Harris was involved with gathering subscribers for the latter. In principle the family seem to have attended all the concerts that they could, taking family tickets (mainly for three people) for the regular series. When no attendance is recorded, this is usually for good reasons: the family's arrival in London from Salisbury was delayed, James Harris's activity was limited by gout or late sittings at the House of Commons, other family illness was involved, or there was a clash with some other event.

In the case of the individual public concerts (A2) the record shows that they attended most of London's principal venues. Even allowing for the uneven survival of documentation, there appears to have been a change in 1775, with a big expansion in attendance at benefit concerts, supplemented by regular attendance at the Concerts of Antient Music. It is not clear whether this reflects a change in the range of concert activity available to Londoners, or a change in the family's social programme. As to the occurrences of the events themselves, the Harris references generally confirm what is available from advertisements, which occasionally also give some details of the music to be performed. Only a couple of occasions are not matched from other sources, and

even in these cases there is the possibility of some accidental misinformation, such as an incorrect date in a diary entry.

The private concerts (B), however, are a different matter. There were usually no public advertisements for these concerts and so the Harris papers provide important, sometimes unique, information; many of the concerts which are calendared there are otherwise undocumented. The references provide virtually no detailed or specific information about the programmes performed, but the entries give the date and time of day for the events, sometimes the names of people present and sometimes the names of performers. In some cases the fact of a concert series (B1) can be reconstructed by putting together successive references on the same day of the week or by a casual hint in correspondence. In view of this necessarily speculative element of reconstruction, B1 concentrates on series that apparently ran for several seasons. Some of these are already known from other sources, as for example Baron Alvensleben's concerts. Even there, however, the Harris papers reveal a situation that illuminates the actions of the 'listeners': the Baron's concerts on Wednesdays involved a clash with the Bach/Abel series, and James Harris had to attend them alternately.

Rather intriguing is one series of concerts that is referred to regularly but somewhat obliquely – as, for example, 'our private concerts'. It appears that there were usually ten concerts per year in this series, hosted in turn in different people's houses, running in a period through January to March. (This was also the usual season for public concert series.) They were probably managed, at least in the early years, by the violinist Antonin Kammell. Elizabeth Harris commented, half protestingly but also half smugly, that the tickets were not transferable. This was obviously a very exclusive social operation with mainly professional performers, though Louisa Harris also regularly took part.

The other private concerts (B2) were more miscellaneous, but there seem to be some patterns. Hosts fixed on regular times: Sir William Young on Sunday evenings in 1770, Mr Ward on Tuesday evenings in 1772 and Sir Charles Cocks (a Harris relative) on Saturday mornings, involving some overlapping with Mrs Chetwynd's concerts at the same time. In this area there are some problems of definition – between concerts and assemblies, between professional and amateur participants – but exclusiveness by invitation was clearly of the essence. The Harrises made occasional excursions to the concerts by the Sharp family in Old Jewry, and their account of the first visit suggests some trepidation: the 'Concert Spirituel' programme was unusual and the venue was away from the comfort zone of the West End.

For some concerts there is evidence of only one or two events, from family (or extended-family) occasions. By far the best documented of these are the concerts

given by James Harris himself at his successive London homes. For two concerts his daughter Gertrude listed the audience – 63 names in 1764 and 89 names in 1765.¹⁹ At that stage Harris was relatively new to London and had rising political prospects, so his concerts probably contributed to making his mark in society. Later his concerts seem to have been designed to give opportunities for Louisa and her friends to perform. Since Louisa was being taught by Italians, it is not surprising that the programmes included works by Pergolesi, Sacchini and Quirino Gasparini, but the repertory around settings of the *Miserere* and the *Stabat Mater* did not sit easily with the potential audience, as Elizabeth Harris noted in 1775:

Your father and I went Wednesday to the oratorio in the Haymarket[;] your sisters are too refin'd for old Handel. We were greatly entertain'd. Never was a finer band, the instrumental parts and the chorus's went as well as in the days of Handel. I do not say much of the voices, though my country men Corfe, and Parry did their parts well.

Yesterday morning we had a different kind of music, viz Sacchinis Miserere which was rehearsd in this room. The voices were Rauzzini (the first opera man), Savoye, Passini, a base, and Louisa. Tis undoubtedly the finest composition imaginable and tis impossible it can be better sung. The great distress of Louisa and Mr Harris is to find out people worthy to hear it, nor can they make out more than five or six among all their acquaintance. We have thought of the Bench of Bishops, some of the Judges, and some Roman Catholics, but the Bishops though they must look grave like things more lively, the Judges are gone the Circuit, and the Papishes have enough of the penitential at this season. This day se'night is fixt for the grand performance. These said musical sett all din'd here yesterday after the Miserere and very entertaining they were; after we came up they play'd and sung a great deal.²⁰

However, things turned out well enough, as Harris recorded in his diary:

March 17 [1775] A fine concert at my house – the Miserere of Sacchini performed by Rauzzini, Savoi, Passini, my daughter Louisa & Webb – the fortepiano playd by Sacchini, the violoncello by Cirri. After it was finished, each of the 3 principal singers (Rauzzini, Savoi & Passini the tenor) sung to the harpsicord –

before they sung their songs, we had a glee of Webbs [sung] by himself, Corfe, Mrs Blosset, Miss Holford, & my daughter – and another glee to conclude the whole. My room was filled with the best company – the singers dined with me. Went in the evening to Mrs Pitt's concert.²¹

The rise of the glee is one of the musical trends which is revealed by the reports of the Harris concerts, and it is interesting that (in this context) there was no convention of all-male performers.

Although the evidence needs to be interpreted with caution, the Harris papers seem to record a growth in the area of private concerts in London, particularly during the 1770s. This was not without its effect on other musical activities. In particular, the occurrence of regular concerts on Wednesdays and Fridays conflicted with the established nights for oratorio performances in the London theatres during the same period; although James Harris had been an enthusiast for Handel's own performances in the 1730s and 1740s, he was rarely seen at the oratorios in the later period. Some aspects of the balances between various factors in the concerts (social/musical, public/private, amateur/professional) are difficult to determine, but my suspicion is that a change in social attitudes had been at work, towards more rigidity in social definitions and exclusions, than had been the case in the first half of the eighteenth century. This may, however, be a reflection simply of an extension in the range and nature of London's musical performances, and even of a shift in the nature of Harris's social circle.²²

Conclusion

In many ways the reports on musical events that are found in the archive of James Harris's papers are typical of the sources from the period. They provide considerable information about the contexts for listening: details of the venues, names of performers and names of members of the audience. There are occasional observations about, and evaluations of, the performers. Personal reactions to what was heard are rare, but the descriptions are extremely valuable on those occasions when the writer is providing an extended report to a like-minded correspondent, rather than simply noting an event in a diary or journal. Most valuable of all, however, is the detailed record that the Harris papers provide of where and when music could be heard in London during the 1760s and 1770s, particularly with regard to private concerts for which we inevitably have no record from contemporary advertisements. The Harris family obviously attended all the musical events that they could during the periods that they

lived in London, and they moved in a social circle where a large proportion of the available musical experience was provided by privately-hosted concerts in domestic venues. Their listening experience often involved several musical events in the same week, at the theatres, concert rooms and private houses.

Appendix

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📖 **LISTENING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY, HARRIS PAPERS, JAMES HARRIS, SALISBURY