

LISTENING TO MUSIC: PEOPLE, PRACTICES AND EXPERIENCES

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London's art music and provincial listeners in England c.1700–1850

David Rowland

David Rowland is Director of Postgraduate Studies, Professor of Music at The Open University and Principal Investigator for the [Listening Experience Database \(LED\)](#) project. He is the author of three books and numerous chapters and articles on the performance history of the piano and early keyboard instruments. More recently, he edited the first scholarly edition of Clementi's correspondence, which provided the impetus for a much broader investigation of the London music trade during the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars, on which he has published extensively. David is also a performer on early keyboard instruments and Director of Music at Christ's College, Cambridge.

Abstract

London dominated the English musical scene from 1700 to 1850, but provincial listeners were increasingly able to sample what the capital had to offer by hearing travelling musicians and by visiting the capital themselves. For most of the period provincial audiences were drawn from the wealthy ranks of society, but towards the middle of the nineteenth century initiatives were taken which opened the concert experience to lower-income listeners.

How did audiences listen? A growing literature suggests that towards the middle of the nineteenth century a new, intense model of listening came to the fore, in contrast to the more casual experience of the eighteenth century. In reality, however, there appears to have been a variety of listening modes in operation at any one time, depending on the context of the musical experience and the individual listener.

What many provincial listening accounts have in common is their description of a gulf in standards between performances by London musicians and their provincial counterparts. The opportunity to hear performers from the capital therefore provided provincial listeners with a distinctive experience.

Introduction

From 1750 to 1850 London's musical life flourished. Underpinning the city's success were highly favourable economic and social conditions.¹ The British economy had expanded steadily for some years and continued to grow more or less consistently in spite of the problems of war. During the period Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per person increased by about 25%, exports grew and the richest 5% in society grew disproportionately wealthier. London was where many of these wealthy individuals were based and between 1700 and 1850 the capital's population quadrupled; in 1851 it numbered 2,362,000, not far short of 15% of the population of England. With such a broad and affluent base of support, it is hardly surprising that London's musical life flourished.

Evidence for the pre-eminence of London within the musical life of the country is found in the activities of its vibrant and extensive concert life, its opera houses, theatres and pleasure gardens. Some of the earliest of Britain's most important musical institutions were founded there, such as the Philharmonic Society (1813) and the Royal Academy of Music (1822). Music publishing and musical instrument making were centred on London and the capital was the first port of call for most visiting musicians from the continent. The city was effectively the home of the British music profession. As Ehrlich noted, 'by far the greatest number of [British] mid-eighteenth-century musicians, perhaps some 1500, were based in London. Apart from the university cities, no provincial centre, except Dublin, Bath, and, for a brief period, Edinburgh, could provide regular employment for more than a score of full-time practitioners; and even their complements never exceeded fifty'.² Although provincial English centres became increasingly important, there was little change in London's position as the main centre for music-making throughout the period.

How did London's art-music culture spread to the English provinces and what was its impact outside of the capital? In this chapter we will consider how that culture was taken to audiences in the provinces, first by describing the mechanics by which that culture was disseminated, and then by considering how listeners reacted when they experienced it at first hand.

London's music and the provinces

Musicians often left London for the provinces during the summer months, when the so-called 'London season' ended. The 'London season' was a well-known feature of social life in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.³ It encompassed the colder parts of the year during which the aristocracy and some of the wealthier middle classes were in the capital. When the season was over they dispersed to their country homes. The dates of this annual rhythm were not fixed, but London's concerts generally ran from around October to May, or a little later, and as temperatures increased the pleasure gardens provided entertainment. The important moment in this annual rhythm when London society emptied into the countryside is captured in a letter dated 25 July 1800, in which Charles Burney expresses his frustration to Longman, Clementi & Co. that the subscribers he had organised to Haydn's *Creation* were 'on the swing' and would be out of the capital 'in a few days',⁴ causing him expense and trouble in delivering their copies of the work.

Wealthier society members who left the capital for their country estates in the summer months sometimes invited musicians to visit them to provide entertainment. For example, Handel visited the Salisbury home of James Harris in 1739.⁵ W. T. Parke's *Memoirs* record a visit of the pianist Muzio Clementi and the cellist John Crostill to Lord Pembroke's estate at Wilton near Salisbury in 1796, where the musicians played at the request of the company.⁶ In 1791 Haydn went to stay with the banker Nathaniel Brassey, who had a country house in Hertfordshire.⁷ At the beginning of August 1794 he went to Bath with the flautist Ashe and the singing teacher and composer Cimador. They stayed at the home of the musician Rauzzini, going to Bristol afterwards, and then on to visit Lord Abingdon.⁸ The musician Sir George Smart was a favourite of the aristocracy and upper middle classes.⁹ Occasions on which he provided musical entertainment to the royal household included several visits to Weymouth in the two decades after 1804 and a number of visits to Brighton in the 1820s and 1830s. These seaside towns had become popular with the royals after Princess Amelia stayed in Weymouth in 1798 and after the Prince Regent (later King George IV) visited Brighton in 1783. Because of their royal connections these towns attracted others from London society who required musical entertainment. Smart also made visits into the country to other well-established figures, such as the piano maker James Broadwood, in 1811, at his country home near Worthing.¹⁰ Of course, most visits such as these by London musicians to the provinces were essentially private affairs; they had little impact on anyone outside the close circle of the patrons who invited them, although the presence

of the royal family tended to be a magnet for other society members, so that the places they visited saw a growth in public entertainment.

Touring musicians from the capital were heard by wider public audiences in the provinces chiefly, but not exclusively, in the summer months. They took advantage of the opportunities presented by a developing provincial concert culture and the emergence of the festivals that were to be such an important feature of the musical life of the nation in the long nineteenth century.¹¹

Concert-giving in Britain arose out of the new entrepreneurial spirit that developed from the second half of the seventeenth century. The idea of selling performances to a fee-paying audience emerged in 1670s London and then spread to the provinces, where the first concerts were established by 1700.¹² These early provincial concerts generally took place in cathedral cities such as Gloucester, Hereford, Norwich, Salisbury, Wells, Worcester and York, and the role and enthusiasm of the local clergy were often crucial to their development. Some concerts were grouped into series, which were paid for by subscription and typically held every fortnight or so, but others were advertised as one-off events. At first, venues varied from a room in the local inn to the local church or cathedral, but assembly rooms also became an increasing feature of musical and social life during the latter part of the eighteenth century. Concert halls were built in increasing numbers towards the end of our period.

In the eighteenth century the musicians who played in concerts were usually a mix of the local gentry and professional musicians such as those employed by the church or, from towards the end of the eighteenth century, those employed as militia bandsmen. These professionals often played multiple instruments, strengthening the ensemble where necessary, and from time to time they were joined by visitors from London who took the role of soloist, or who led the orchestra, or various sections of it, for special occasions. In the course of the nineteenth century the number of professional musicians outside London increased rapidly, as did the numbers of London musicians who toured.

Touring musicians from London began to take part in provincial concerts and festivals not long after the events themselves became established. The musicians typically planned their visits to coincide with special summer events such as race week, or the visits of the assizes courts, when potential concert audiences were at their largest. Early examples of touring musicians include Charles and Nathaniel Love, evidently from London, who gave concerts in Sunderland and Newcastle in 1733.¹³ In the same year the *Gloucester Journal* reported that the Steward of the Festival 'had collected, out of London, the first performers both vocal and instrumental'.¹⁴ London-based musicians

who visited Norwich in the 1740s were the instrumentalists Andrea Caporale (1741) and Nicolò Pasquali (1741, 1743), along with the singers Filippo Palma (1742) and Leonardo Pescatore (1746–47).¹⁵ On 23 June 1746 Signora Avoglio, who had accompanied Handel to Dublin in 1741, was the main attraction at a concert in Salisbury¹⁶ and in 1751 the singer Galli, the violinist Giardini and the cellist Beneke played in concerts at York during race week.¹⁷ More rarely, musicians toured at other times of the year, such as the London horn player Mr Charles, who visited Stamford, York, Dublin, Bristol, Worcester, Hereford, Gloucester, Salisbury, Bath and Newcastle, mostly in the winter months between 1741 and 1754.¹⁸

Festivals provided opportunities for some of the largest provincial audiences to hear London musicians. Beginning in the second decade of the eighteenth century with the three-choirs event, and possibly around the same time in Salisbury, festivals grew throughout the eighteenth century in number and ambition.¹⁹ They typically took place in July, August, September and October, and lasted for two, three or, later, four days. Some towns and cities were able to support annual festivals, at least for a few consecutive years, but others opted for a more manageable three-year cycle, or a more irregular pattern. By the second half of the eighteenth century festivals were taking place, not only in the major cathedral cities, but also in smaller market towns such as Ashby de la Zouch, Framlingham, Knaresborough, in towns and villages of Lancashire and the west of Yorkshire, and in some of the developing industrial centres such as Birmingham and Sheffield. Following a lull during the Napoleonic Wars they gained momentum again from the 1820s. Frequently, a London musician would take responsibility for booking a number of professional colleagues from the capital.

Other special events that attracted groups of London musicians were the celebrations sometimes comprising one or more performances that accompanied the inauguration of new organs. On 10 August 1793, for example, the *Norfolk Chronicle* noted that:

Mr. SHARP ... received a Letter from Messrs. Longman and Broderip, saying, they should send down Master FIELD, to Play a Concerto on the Grand Piano Forte, at the Evening Concert, who, tho' only TEN YEARS of Age, is said to be as celebrated a Performer on that Instrument as any now in London.

A similarly grand opening of a new organ in Bury St Edmunds took place on 19 September 1826. The London violinist Franz Cramer led the orchestra and Robert Lindley played the cello, accompanying singers from the capital.²⁰

Aside from festivals and concerts, many towns witnessed musical theatre performances which sometimes involved performers from London. Purpose-built theatre buildings became established in many towns from the middle of the eighteenth century, prior to which visiting troupes performed in inns or other temporary spaces.

An important factor in the support and development of touring, whether for concerts, festivals or other events, was the country's transport infrastructure. At the beginning of our period the road network was in need of significant improvement, although the passing of the Turnpike Act in 1707 had ensured that a framework for development was in place. As the century progressed the pace of change quickened and the quality of the new turnpike roads increased both reliability and journey times; between the middle and end of the eighteenth century there was a three-fold increase in average stagecoach speeds.²¹

Increasingly good transport facilities and growing opportunities for audiences in some of the fast-developing industrial towns of the period inevitably led to more and more opportunities for London's musicians to travel outside of the capital. While in the middle of the eighteenth century musicians may have visited a small number of provincial towns or cities on an occasional basis, by 1800 many were making regular visits around the country. George Smart noted in passing that in 1801 'I paid professional visits to Bristol, Bath and Trowbridge, and spent part of the summer on a tour through Hastings, Dover, Maidstone, etc'.²² Smart's contemporary, the double-bass player Domenico Dragonetti, took particular advantage of the possibilities that touring offered. From the 1790s onwards he performed in Bath, Birmingham, Brighton, Bristol, Bury St Edmunds, Cambridge, Cheltenham Spa, Chester, Derby, Dublin, Edinburgh, Exeter, Gloucester, Hereford, Hull, Leeds, Leamington Spa, Liverpool, Manchester, Newcastle, Norwich, Oxford, Reading, Shrewsbury, Southampton, Wakefield, Winchester, Worcester and York.²³

London musicians increasingly found that they could put together a tour of several festivals in a row, but organisers were rightly fearful that over-full schedules would jeopardise the success of their events. In 1824 the Norwich Festival was directed by George Smart and the opening week began with heavy rain:

*This gave rise to no little apprehension, which was increased by the late termination of the Worcester meeting, and the consequent difficulties in which several of the principal performers were placed. One or two arrived in Norwich on the Monday afternoon, but at the final rehearsal, which occupied the whole of the day, there were still several absentees.*²⁴

Touring reached new heights in the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Within the course of a few months in 1831 Niccolò Paganini performed a total of 65 concerts in Ireland, Scotland and England.²⁵ A similarly extravagant tour was undertaken a decade later by Liszt. By Liszt's time the railway network, which expanded rapidly in the 1830s and 1840s, made parts of the journey faster and more reliable, although many legs of the tour were still undertaken by road. From the point of view of listening history these tours were significant, because they marked a change in audience experience; Paganini wrote to his friend Geremi that 'nowadays people do not ask each other whether they have heard Paganini, but whether they have seen him'.²⁶

Provincial gentlemen and musicians in London

Visits of London musicians to the provinces were only one way in which the capital's musical culture spread throughout the country, because many of those who were not ordinarily London residents visited the city from time to time, taking back to their home towns and cities their experience of musical performances, as well as some of the repertoire that they heard. Many of those visitors to London were the sons of wealthy families who were known among the city's residents because they were related to them, or because they knew them through another network such as having been fellow students at one of the country's historic universities – a particularly important means by which relationships were built and maintained among gentlemen.

Edward Finch (1663–1738) was the fifth surviving son of the first Earl of Nottingham, the Lord Chancellor, who studied at Christ's College, Cambridge and became a prebendary of York Minster.²⁷ Finch was a keen amateur musician who spent much of his life in Yorkshire, but who frequently visited London and knew many of the most prominent musicians of his day, from whom he seems to have received lessons. John Courtney (1737–1806) was the son of a senior administrator in the East India Trading Company. His father became Governor of Surat, but spent his later years in Yorkshire. Courtney, a student at Trinity College, Cambridge and another keen amateur musician, travelled widely to towns and cities where London musicians often performed and he spent time in the capital, where he attended musical events. Thomas Twining (1735–1804) was the grandson of the founder of the tea and coffee business that bears the family name. He declined to work for the company and instead attended Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and then went into the church, working in three parishes in Essex. There were many more like Finch, Courtney and Twining, but these are singled out as examples of well-connected gentlemen who had a keen interest in music.

It was not only country gentlemen who made visits to London; many musicians who spent most of their time in the provinces were either trained in London, employed there for short periods, or visited on occasion. Traffic also flowed in the opposite direction; some musicians who were normally employed in London spent short periods of their professional lives in the provinces.

Edward Miller (1735–1807) started life in Norwich, was taught by Charles Burney, spent time in London, but settled in Doncaster, where he took up a post as an organist. He retained his London connections and was later unsuccessfully recommended to the post of Master of the King's Music.²⁸ Charles Avison (1709–1795) was born in Newcastle, spent time in London and returned to an organist's post in his home town. Michael Sharp (1750/1–1800), an oboist who played in Covent Garden and in other London venues, visited Norwich as a soloist and then led the theatre orchestra in Norwich in 1783/4.²⁹ The Dean and Chapter of Durham Cathedral sent their singing men to London for their 'improvement' in the early eighteenth century, as did the Corporation of Newcastle later in the century.³⁰

Taking all this evidence together we may safely conclude that there were multiple means by which provincial listeners could become acquainted with London's music and musicians in the period c.1700–1850. At first, opportunities to hear the capital's music were limited, but as infrastructure developed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it became increasingly common for London's performers and repertoire to be heard around the country, both in private and in public; the latter became particularly important as concerts and festivals became more frequent. But how uniform was the picture across the country and who, exactly, had the opportunity to interact with London's musical culture?

Provincial musical development, 'hotspots' and listeners

The trajectory of musical development was not uniformly upwards in every town or city. Some who had enjoyed the presence of visiting musicians in one decade might be starved of their presence for years afterwards, because the local infrastructure that supported provincial music-making was fragile. Festivals came and went because of the risk of war, political uncertainty at home or some other reason, as Pritchard notes:

Even well-established meetings were not immune from the change which was sweeping the country. The failure of the long-

continued festivals at Salisbury, Ashby de la Zouch and Manchester in 1789, 1790 and 1793 respectively, and the falling receipts and possible collapse of the Three Choirs meeting in the 1790s underlined the fact that ‘.. the minds of men were agitated to an unexampled degree by the opening scenes in the political world, which soon left them but little leisure to cultivate the peaceful delights arising from choral music ...’³¹

Concert series thrived or waned according to local enthusiasm. For example, a local newspaper reported something approaching a musical famine prior to the visit of a number of London performers for the inauguration of a new organ in 1826:

It is now above twenty years since a performance of music on an extended scale has been attempted in the town of Bury ... It is true that, in the long space which has elapsed, the cultivation of music has been widely extended [in Britain]; but we question whether Bury has felt the influence of that extension to any considerable degree. At all events, there has been no communication of harmony between its inhabitants; no society of amateurs – we doubt if even a Glee Club has ever attained any sort of ‘form or combination’.³²

But amid the rise and fall of local musical fortunes it is still possible to identify significant ‘hotspots’, where London’s art-music culture could usually be experienced regularly. The old cathedral cities were particularly important and it was to these that the wealthiest in society gravitated for their concerts and festivals, and where London’s musicians were most likely to be found in the eighteenth century. The university towns of Oxford and Cambridge were also major provincial destinations for London musicians, as were spa towns and seaside resorts, particularly from the latter part of the century. As urban growth became a major factor in the nineteenth century, new opportunities presented themselves in the rapidly-growing industrial areas.

The extent of the musical activities in ‘hotspots’ was reflected in the presence of the music trade – instrument makers, music shops, booksellers who sold music, and engravers. In York, for example, which acted as a hub for musical activity in the region, there were more than a dozen music sellers, music printers and musical instrument makers during the eighteenth century.³³ In stark contrast were some of the major industrial cities, where there was little evidence of the music trade prior to 1800. Despite Manchester’s rapid growth in the late eighteenth century and the formation of its ‘Gentleman’s Concert’ in 1777, the extent of its pre-1800 music trade appears to be

one early eighteenth-century bookseller who also sold music, a single music shop which functioned in the 1780s and 1790s, and two instrument makers.³⁴ Strikingly, the population of York was much smaller than that of Manchester at the 1801 census, so it was not simply size that prompted musical activity, but rather the presence of the right sort of people.

So who listened to art music in the 'hotspots'? The answer is relatively simple; throughout most of the period it was predominantly the gentry and the aristocracy. Concert fees and entrance tickets for performances in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were well above anything that could be afforded by the lower orders and the subscription system, when it was in operation, ensured that only a certain class of listener attended. And aside from festival gatherings, which were usually numbered in the hundreds and included attenders from several miles around, audiences for local concerts were often small – the numbers of the performers and the audience on some occasions were roughly equal and concerts often seem to have been given as much for the pleasure of the performers as for the audience.³⁵ Since private performances took place in the homes of the wealthy, their audiences were selected by the patrons.

It is well-documented that the profile of audiences began to change in the nineteenth century.³⁶ Elite events continued, but from c.1830 a number of ventures were established which enabled the poorer in society to encounter art music of various kinds. These events ranged from choral concerts to promenade events, at which the admission charge was within the financial reach of audiences who had not previously been able to attend these sorts of events. Many of these initiatives were developed in London, but the idea of opening musical events to wider audiences rapidly spread to the provinces.

An early attempt to broaden the composition of audiences outside of London was reported on 28 March 1835 in the *Norwich Mercury*, which commented on an ultimately unsuccessful 'attempt to establish an elegant and intellectual entertainment upon a scale and at a rate of admission which should open them to the numbers of the people'. The concerts seem to have been organised by a similar group to that which organised the Norwich Festival, with significant input from C. H. Mueller, who previously played in the Haymarket Theatre Orchestra.³⁷ However, although these concerts probably attracted some of the local artisans, the one-shilling 'cheap' tickets would still have been beyond the reach of most of the labouring classes. In the 1840s the flamboyant conductor Jullien conducted populist concerts for which a similar entrance fee was charged. He put on events in London, but then toured the provinces with his promenade concerts. Cheap concerts were also given in Birmingham and Leeds.³⁸

With all of these concerts, however, the low-price tickets remained too expensive for most of the lowest-paid, whose disposable incomes generally enabled attendance only at events costing a few pence. In the next decade Hallé put on mass concerts in Manchester as part of the Art Treasures Exhibition, following initiatives such as the performances of Manchester's Mechanics' Institution to attract lower-paid listeners to musical events.³⁹ Further cheap series occurred in Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, Oldham, Sheffield and probably many other places.⁴⁰ Hallé's aim was to make music available to a wide audience and he commented that 'thousands and thousands of people from the northern counties there heard a symphony for the first time, and it was interesting to watch how the appreciation of such works grew keener and keener almost with every week'.⁴¹ His claims may have been exaggerated, but the venture nevertheless seems to have attracted a wider audience than attended many previous events.

Although these ventures attempted to bring music to a wider audience, for most of our period art music was listened to by an elite audience. Among that audience were some for whom listening to musicians from London was commonplace, but there were also many for whom any opportunity of experiencing London's musical culture remained a special event, perhaps not duplicated on more than an annual basis, if that. These are important factors in interpreting the reaction of listeners and the way in which they record their listening experiences, as we will see. In addition, the wider context of audience behaviour also determined the nature and extent of the information that they recorded in their diaries, correspondence and other documents.

Listening practice

In the first half of the nineteenth century there was a general trend away from a concert environment in which audience members might arrive and leave during performances, move around, talk to each other and comment on the performance, towards a model more closely representing our present-day audiences, who sit in silence, sometimes in semi-darkness, engaging in what James Johnson has termed 'absorbed listening'.⁴² From this shift in audience habits some have drawn the conclusion that eighteenth-century audiences did not really listen at all, a position dismissed by William Weber, who argues that:

music was more closely linked to other social activities than is true at least in classical-music contexts today. But that does not necessarily mean that people did not, or could not, listen to the

music or take it seriously ... The discovery that not everyone was absorbed in listening at every moment seems disturbing to us, given the idealistic aesthetic that defines our approach to musical experience. But this should not lure us into thinking that one could not listen in the earlier period, or, indeed, that people in general did not.⁴³

How general the nineteenth-century change was in the listening environment is not yet clear; the studies that discuss the subject have concentrated on the wealthy, fee-paying audiences at public concerts and operas in capital cities, rather than a more comprehensive set of listening environments. But it has at least been shown that many who attended these sorts of events in the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries behaved differently from their later counterparts. From their own accounts we learn that their preoccupations tended to include the surroundings, other audience members, organisational and other matters; descriptions of the music or its performance are often surprisingly rare by comparison.

John Courtney of Beverley in Yorkshire illustrates the point. As described above, he was a gentleman musician who attended many concerts in his home town, noting them in his private diaries, the musical references of which have been transcribed recently by Christopher Roberts.⁴⁴ Two typical entries describing musical events in Courtney's home town of Beverley are as follows:

29 March 1759: 'This evening Mr Enter had his concert at assembly room, where was a very splendid show of ladies and gentlemen, and a very agreeable ball. There were about 100 people at the concert 'tis imagined'.

8 January 1761: 'This evening had a little concert at our house. Ten performers vizt: First fiddle – Mr Smith; Second Fiddles – Master Raguenaue, Master E Raguenuau, Mr Enter; German Flutes – Mr Feanside, Mr Cox, Mr Tong; Violoncello – Mr De Montet; Harpsichord, Thor Bass – J. Courtney; Voice – Mr Raines. My uncle and Mr Pearson and Mr Groves drank tea with us'.

These brief extracts resemble many other diary entries by John Courtney and his contemporaries; they say nothing about the music, or the way in which listeners responded to it, concentrating on details of context instead. Typically, in accounts such as these, mention is made of the venue, the promoter, the extent and composition of the audience, the type of event (whether a concert, a ball, a theatre performance, or

something else) and the details of the performers (names, instruments and voices, but little else). That Courtney enjoyed these events is not in question; he went frequently and sometimes performed at them. Presumably because they were a fundamental part of the social fabric of life in Beverley he chose to record the social aspects of the experiences. We cannot tell to what extent he enjoyed them as musical experiences.

Outside of the tightly-knit community of Beverley, however, Courtney was much more inclined to record details of the music and performances, often making evaluative remarks about both. For example, on 21 April 1762 Courtney attended a concert in London:

I was at the oratorio of Judas Maccabeus (Frazi's Benefit) at the Great Room in Dean Street Soho, twas very grand but the Messiah is finer, Frazi, Miss Young, Beard and Champness, etc, etc, sung; and Stanley played a concerto on the organ; very fine.

A week later he was at Ranelagh Gardens: 'Heard Miss Brent sing – fine voice and manner – Miss Thomas, Signor Tenducci, and Mr Hudson sang very well'. Do these more musically-oriented accounts suggest that Courtney listened differently when he was outside of the orbit of his familiar Beverley surroundings, hearing musicians from the capital? We cannot be sure, but there are several reasons why this may have been so. It could be that the repertoire he heard away from Beverley particularly attracted his attention, whereas the local concerts repeated works that he knew well already; the evidence of some local music societies suggests that they repeated an ageing repertoire, rather than engaging in more recent music. Or perhaps the familiarity of Beverley's social environment meant that the 'company' was more interesting than the music. Maybe the standard of the Beverley performances was sufficiently low (see below) that his attention strayed elsewhere. But perhaps there was no real difference in the quality of Courtney's listening experience when he was away from home; rather, in the absence of his wider Beverley associates, he chose to concentrate on the music when he wrote his diary.

Performance standards

All of the above may have been true for Courtney, but one of the suggested factors – the higher standard of London musicians' performances – is a common refrain in sources of the period, suggesting that performances by these musicians would have been more eagerly anticipated and more carefully observed than the routine local

equivalents. An early example is found in a report of the Gloucester Festival of 1733, which noted that ‘the performances were the best that had ever been known’, as a result of the presence of London musicians.⁴⁵ A report on the Newcastle Festival of 1791, directed by John Ashley, who brought with him several musicians from London, similarly reported that ‘the performances have been so infinitely superior to whatever we have witnessed here, that the audience, enraptured by the heavenly sounds, seemed lost in admiration and astonishment.’⁴⁶ The 1815 Halifax Festival, also organised by the Ashley family and including several musicians from London, was described in the press as ‘a feast of harmony beyond any musical treat before given in this country’.⁴⁷ On 25 October 1834 the *Norwich Mercury* reported on a performance in the city of Haydn’s *Creation* eight days previously, noting that ‘the music went very creditably to a provincial hand, for accompaniment so difficult as Haydn’s is rarely encountered by instrumentalists unaided by the musicians of the metropolis’ (p. 3).

But Norwich performances had not always been so good. The clergyman John Edmund Cox, born in 1812 and brought up in the city, included in his *Recollections* accounts of the relatively poor standard of performances in his home town. His remarks include accounts of concerts there around 1820, where the works of Corelli, Haydn and Mozart:

*were practised weekly by amateurs in a private concert-room, with two first and second violins, one viola, one violoncello, and a double-bass – the violoncello being scraped by an ambitious plasterer, with such an absence of tone and taste as would have made dear old Bob Lindley’s hair stand on end; and the double bass rasped at a frightful rate by an eccentric clergyman, with so small an idea of the nature of a nuance, that it would have made Dragonetti swear, ‘She! Dirty blackguard!’ The wind instruments were of the like proportion as to number and quality ...*⁴⁸

Similarly, in 1841 the singer John Barnett wrote to Dragonetti from Cheltenham:

*I should very much like to come to London for a few days to shake you by the hand, & to hear an orchestra ... here, there is not the ghost of a Band, nor the least approach to musical feeling.*⁴⁹

When Charles Hallé encountered the very well-funded orchestra of the Gentleman’s Concert in Manchester in the late 1840s his reaction was:

The orchestra! oh, the orchestra! I was fresh from the ‘Concerts du Conservatoire’, from Hector Berlioz’s orchestra, and I seriously

thought of packing up and leaving Manchester, so that I might not have to endure a second of these wretched performances⁵⁰

At the end of the year 1849 the conductorship of the 'Gentleman's Concerts' was offered to me, and I accepted it on the condition that the band should be dismissed and its reorganisation left entirely in my hands.⁵¹

Looking back over his life in 1872 John Edmund Cox provided a historical perspective when he addressed the gulf in standards that often existed between London and the provinces:

Where fifty years ago executants [in the provinces] could be numbered scarcely by tens, they may now be computed by thousands. Nor does the metropolis alone supply the best-instructed musicians of the day. Time was when the oratorios of Handel and Haydn could not be given in any of the country cities or provincial towns, not even in the 'grand' – as they were called – 'triennial meetings of Birmingham, York and Norwich' without aid being had from the London Ancient Concerts, the Lenten oratorios held in Covent Garden and Drury Lane Theatres and the Opera House, for leading 'the attack,' and keeping the local choristers together ... Such is no longer the case.⁵²

In light of these comments it is perhaps no wonder that John Courtney tended to comment more specifically on the music and its performance when it included London musicians. But the qualities of the music and the musicians may not have been the only factors that contributed to the impact music had on him outside of Beverley. In a number of accounts from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries it is also clear that the splendour of the surroundings – typically cathedrals – also made a significant impression. The clergyman James Woodford, who lived a few miles outside of Norwich, recorded in his diary for 2 August 1792 a description of a performance of music from Handel's oratorios, including London musicians in the city's cathedral; it is 'not only delightful but seemed heavenly and gave us Ideas of divine Musick.'⁵³ And at rehearsal for an annual charity concert in the same cathedral during Assizes Week around 1820 two London trumpeters (Harper and Hyde) performed:

the first notes of whose instruments, as they echoed through the vaulted roof of that sacred building at the rehearsal of Handel's Dettingen Te Deum, caused not only the boys, but the whole

*orchestra and the few strangers who were admitted, to stare at them in astonishment. The band on the instant stopped.*⁵⁴

Performances such as these were doubly noteworthy because of the quality of the musicians and the splendour of the surroundings.⁵⁵ Such a combination would have been relatively rare for many provincial listeners – perhaps a once-every-year experience, or rarer still, for many of them.

Thomas Twining's listening experiences

The kind of listening that we have been considering gives a lie to the notion that eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century audiences did not really listen at public musical events. They clearly did, even if it was, for some of them, only on special occasions when the best musicians were heard in splendid surroundings. But it was not only at big public events that music was capable of making a deep impression on provincial listeners in the period. One individual who was deeply affected when he encountered the best that the capital's culture could offer in a domestic setting was Thomas Twining, referred to above. Although Twining experienced music on a fairly regular basis in and around Colchester, he only occasionally travelled to London, or had other opportunities to listen to the country's finest musicians. When he did so the result was often intense and his accounts provide strong evidence against those who imagine that 'absorbed listening' did not occur prior to the nineteenth century. On 24 February 1780 Twining wrote to his friend John Hey expressing his reaction to hearing Sarah Harrop in London, who was shortly to be married to Joah Bates, the conductor of the Concerts of Ancient Music:

*... we dined with Bates one day, & heard Miss Harrop sing from tea-time till ten o'clock ... One of the greatest musical treats I ever had. I had, as Sir Hugh Evans says, 'great dispositions to cry'; nay, the tears actually came out ... She sung Pergolesi, Leo, Hasse – things I know, & that nobody sings. It gave me some faint idea of meeting one's departed friends in Heaven.*⁵⁶

The intensity of this London experience was part of a larger picture for Twining. Being starved of high-level culture at home in Essex made him hungry to experience the best the capital could offer, as he had explained to his friend Charles Jenner eleven years earlier. On 20 February 1769 Twining wrote to Jenner:

I fully intended writing to you from the great city; but you know what a place the great city is; especially to a man who comes & stays there, staring with his mouth open, for five weeks only, once in two years. On one rainy morning I actually sat down to write to you, but was interrupted before I had finish'd the first sentence: & had I not been, I never cou'd have gone on, with such an unsettled dissipated brain, full of [the singer] Lovattini, & [the actor] Garrick, & [the opera composer] Picini, & [the artist] Reynolds, &c., vibrating, & quivering like a jelly.⁵⁷

Changing performance styles

Aside from the issues of the quality of listeners' experiences and the impact of London's musicians heard in impressive surroundings, the period's literature sometimes comments on the way in which London musical fashions were received around the country. It is clear that repertoire could travel very quickly, but how in touch with London performance styles were provincial listeners? An answer to this question would be an extensive study in itself, and only a small amount of evidence can be presented here.

One of the most noticeable shifts in performance styles that became noticeable at larger musical events, especially festivals, concerned singing. In the second quarter of the nineteenth century, London audiences had become accustomed to a new, more powerful delivery, especially in opera (and, of course, it was London's operatic singers who travelled to the provinces in the summer months).⁵⁸ Provincial audiences took positions on the issue. The bass singer Henry Phillips was engaged to sing in the *Messiah* in Huddersfield Parish Church in the mid-1820s. Having discussed the general trend towards more powerful singing that was becoming normal in London in an earlier part of his *Recollections*, he included an account of the audience's reaction to his own performance. His comments not only speak of the preferences of some of the amateur Yorkshire choral singers who took part in the performance, but judging by the language in which the account is couched they also provide rare evidence of lower-class listening experiences:

when the morning arrived for the performance of 'The Messiah', all eyes and ears were fixed on me, and I believe I sang my solos steadily and well, no stop being made till after the 'Hallelujah Chorus', when some twenty minutes were allowed, during which

time the chorus and orchestra assembled in the church-yard, discussing the merits of the performance. Observing a group of sturdy, robust men in one corner of the yard, and fancying they were, from their appearance, bass singers, and talking about me, I sidled up near them unobserved, and found I was correct; one saying to the other, – ‘What dost think o’ this chap Phillips?’ The general response to which was – ‘Noute!!’ ‘Why, he beant but oth lad”, said one. ‘And haven’t power loike,’ said another.⁵⁹

The opera composer John Barnett, who had previously worked in London, found an entirely different attitude in Cheltenham. He wrote to Dragonetti in 1841, complaining of the town’s conservative taste, commenting that ‘singing must be soft and lady-like, no energy, no passion[,] these are vulgar & the Master who attempts to bring them out, is dismissed.’⁶⁰ Evidently singing styles were a subject of debate, at least in some places.

Conclusion

In such a short space it is impossible to give anything like a full account of the impact of London’s art-music culture on listening in the provinces. However, what may be said in general terms is that those who encountered this culture were generally of the higher social classes and that the extent to which they engaged with it depended on their proximity to provincial musical ‘hotspots’ and the extent to which they were able to travel. Some provincial listeners not only heard the capital’s musicians relatively frequently in those ‘hotspots’, but also when the listeners themselves spent time in London. Others were relatively starved of opportunities, living in parts of the country usually bypassed by London’s musicians. As the period progressed and the country’s transport infrastructure developed, there can be no doubt that many more provincial listeners were able to experience the best that London had to offer and by the middle of the nineteenth century a number of promoters had taken it upon themselves to engage a much wider public in hearing the best musicians in the land.

What is clear from many listening sources of the period is the gulf in standards that very often existed between the standard of performance achieved by London’s musicians and those in the provinces; this is probably to be expected, because provincial music-making depended to such a large extent on amateur musicians, who were seldom to be compared with their professional counterparts. By the middle of the

nineteenth century the gulf was narrowing, but it still existed in many, if not most, places.

Listening experiences of all sorts are recorded by provincial listeners, from listening as part of the social fabric of a community to much more intense experiences. They depended on many factors, including the social context, the physical environment, the quality of performances and the frequency with which listeners heard the best musicians. The variety of listening experiences that existed has not previously been recognised adequately and its existence prompts a re-evaluation of listening cultures in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

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📁 **LISTENING IN HISTORICAL CONTEXTS**

ABSORBED LISTENING, CHEAP CONCERTS, JOHN COURTNEY, LONDON SEASON, PROVINCIAL CONCERT, PROVINCIAL FESTIVAL, PROVINCIAL LISTENING, PROVINCIAL MUSIC, THOMAS TWINING, TOURING