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Hannah Ann and William Stirling: exchanging views on their listening experiences 1834–1842

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Abstract

Hannah Ann Stirling (1816–1843) and her brother William (1818–1878), ninth Baronet of Pollok, received a typical education for those of their social class, which included exposure to the Fine Arts. Hannah Ann became an accomplished pianist and William went on to become a leading expert in Spanish art. We can follow their exchange of views on reading, attending concerts, and buying works of art through 141 letters. Both attended concerts and the opera but with different levels of musical knowledge; Hannah played the piano and harp, while William did not play any instrument and frequently refers to his lack of musical knowledge. Throughout their correspondence, William is determined to please his sister by writing about the performances he attends, and provides her with insightful comments about both the music and the performers. Hannah, however, knowing that William professes to have little interest in music, rarely writes any details about the music she hears. Examining their letters

highlights some of the challenges and rewards of working with this type of historical material, where the writers endeavour to recapture in a shared language the fleeting effect of music and thereby manage to compare various qualities of the performers, music, and instruments.

Introduction

Hannah Ann Stirling (b. Kenmure House, 17 August 1816 – d. Carlsbad, 20 July 1843) and her brother William (b. Kenmure House, 8 March 1818 – d. Venice, 15 January 1878) left a collection of 141 letters through which we can gain some understanding of the closeness of their relationship and the events they experienced through nine years of their lives. This collection of letters that preserves both sides of their discussions, is now deposited in the Glasgow City Archives.

[footnote] [1] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 1–141. I am grateful to the Glasgow City Archives for permission to include quotations from these letters and other archival documents in this chapter. [/footnote]

The letters start in December 1830 and end in May 1843, a few months before Hannah's death. We learn little about the topics of their earliest discussions, which are contained in three widely-spaced letters dating from December 1830, August 1831, and October 1834. Fortunately, the letter of October 1834 lands in the middle of a conversation about music. It was written when Hannah was 18 and moving between family residences in Scotland and London, and William was 16 and still at a boarding school in Leicester, from where he took up a place at Trinity College, Cambridge. They always write tenderly to each other, exchanging family news, and encouraging each other to pursue their interests as well as offering and asking for advice on cultural matters, particularly with respect to their reading materials. In writing about music, however, they seem to be sharing a private joke, one in which Hannah Ann is cast as the more informed party, while William plays the part of the hopeless ignoramus.

Although Hannah Ann played the piano and harp and took singing lessons, she rarely writes to William about the music that she heard, be that in private or in public, even though she undoubtedly possessed the knowledge and technical vocabulary to do so. (The wider archive collection relating to Hannah includes over 100 letters that she received from family and friends; Hannah's side of these conversations is not preserved in the Glasgow City Archives collection. Only five letters written to Hannah make reference to music, three of which are considered below: one each from her father, a relative in Mannheim, and her friend Jessy Paterson. The latter two appear to be responding to musical matters in the letter they had received from Hannah.)

William, on the other hand, continually reminds his sister in his letters that he has no musical knowledge and is not particularly interested in music, and yet it is precisely in those letters where we find the richest observations about opera performances in particular. William's vocabulary is that of a layman, which is just as valuable to the researcher as anything written in a professional musical language. His descriptive vocabulary tends to be narrow, and changes during the period under investigation, but it is sufficient to convey his appreciation of the music and performers. The earliest letter that refers to an opera performance in London shows that what William lacked in depth of musical knowledge was made up for in his ability to make astute comments about the quality of the singing and acting. In the remaining letters written during the period under consideration, he brings more of an appreciation of the whole theatrical experience into his writings, and gradually focuses more on the visual impact of the event.

A few of the performances that William attended are recorded in both his personal diaries and in his letters to Hannah, and it is interesting to compare the details in each. In the diaries, he writes brief comments and rarely writes in fully-formed sentences. Sometimes the entry comprises simply a list of performers; sometimes there are one or two words about either the music or one of the opera singers. This is typical of his way of recording other events, and the overall impression of William's diaries during this period is that they are being written as a personal record of his activities and experiences. There is no suggestion that he intended someone else to read them, or that the contents will be used to support a later publication. This is borne out in the entry for 16 February 1839:

Left off my Journal as a useless formality!!!!

[footnote] [2] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. For discussions of different types of diaries see the Introduction as well as other chapters in this collection, especially David Rowland, 'The listening experiences of John Yeoman (1748–1824), and Ina Knoth, 'Musicking – conversing – writing: towards a cultural perspective on music listening in eighteenth-century Britain'. [/footnote]

In his letters to Hannah, on the other hand, he provides more insight into his reactions to the music or an appraisal of some of the performers.

Establishing their musical credentials

One of the earliest letters in the collection provides the type of information that allows us to begin to understand the respective musical credentials of Hannah Ann and William. Although there is clearly a lacuna at this point, it is easy to pick up the conversation in which the 16 year old William is obviously writing a response to his sister's comments about his musical knowledge:

*Friday October 31st 1834, Coss[ington] Rect[ory], Leicester
You do me wrong, sister Hannah, in supposing me altogether an
ignoramus in musical common places, and particularly in the
fame of Monsieur Herz the premier pianist to Louis Philippe & the
first composer of his age in so much that I have read his name
many tens of times upon the flourished and illuminated backs or
title pages of music books.*

[footnote] [3] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK29/ 1/ 3, p. 3.

[/footnote]

Presumably the 'Monsieur Herz' mentioned is Henri Herz (1803–1888) one of the famed piano virtuosi of the nineteenth century.

[footnote] [4] Stephan D. Lindeman, 'Henri Herz', *Grove Music Online*. <https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.12915>, accessed 6 October 2018. [/footnote]

Hannah replies to this comment about 'Monsieur Herz' in a letter dated five months later, in March of the following year:

*I have been to several concerts [in Edinburgh], but you, who are
deaf as the dead to harmony care not for such trifling nonsense:
so I will not torment you about the 'Pianist to Louis Philippe, and
the first Composer of his age', nor a string of names to you
unintelligible ...*

[footnote] [5] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 91, p. 3.

[/footnote]

This short exchange speaks volumes of their respective knowledge of music. Yet it could equally provide insight to a private joke, one in which Hannah is regarded as the expert, while William defers to his sister's knowledge and pleads the part of the less-informed party. Thus, Hannah is quick to indicate that her brother has no interest in music, and her statement appears to be endorsed in one of William's letters written

two years later in June 1837 where he says, with reference to attending the opera in London:

I wish you were here, to enjoy all these musicians, who are thrown away upon me, I suppose.

[footnote] [6] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/18, p. 4.

[/footnote]

Later again in February 1841 while in Paris he continues to protest his lack of musical understanding:

I have seen almost every opera that is ever given & am not passionately musical (as you know) I never go there, except when a seat in a box is given to me.

[footnote] [7] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/45, p. 4.

[/footnote]

These examples are typical of the tone of their epistolary relationship over eight or nine years until Hannah's untimely death in July 1843 just before her 27th birthday. Rarely, among the surviving documents, do we read any descriptions of musical performances from the pen of Hannah Ann, while William strives to write about the music he hears, particularly opera, knowing that this will please his sister. In spite of his protestations that he is 'not passionately musical', William does attend the opera regularly both in London and during his tours on the continent, even when he is required to pay for the tickets himself (as recorded in his expenses). These do not seem to be the actions of one with no interest in music. On the contrary, he does appear to have a certain interest in music, even if he considered himself to lack the insider knowledge of one who plays an instrument. Indeed, it is likely that through frequent exposure to performances of works by, for example, Bellini, Donizetti, Cimarosa, Mozart, and Weber, William did acquire some musical knowledge, albeit not the same level of privileged knowledge that Hannah possessed as a player.

Hannah Ann's musical ability

Before going any further, it will be helpful to give some indication of Hannah's own musical education and proficiency since this provides the context in which William writes to her, and may even have influenced his choice of musical matters to write about. From her diaries, Hannah comes across as a young woman who took her

practising seriously, spending hours at the harp or piano. David Johnson suggests that harmonically self-supporting instruments such as the piano and harp were considered as suitable instruments for ladies to play, at least among the societies that he investigated in the southern parts of Scotland; a fact that holds true for the rest of Britain and the continent into the nineteenth century.

[footnote] [8] David Johnson, *Music and Society in Lowland Scotland in the Eighteenth Century* (Edinburgh: Mercat Press, 2003), p. 24; Lucy Green, *Music, Gender, Education* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 59. [/footnote]

Her letters to William include some details about her practising, her music teachers, and their father, Archibald Stirling (1769–1847), buying her a harp. For example, in February 1835, she writes:

... I intended writing to you yesterday as I promised dear William but I found it to be a moral impossibility; & as my fingers are too sore to practise the Harp, owing to a hard practice of three hours and a half on Tuesday, I seize time by the fore locks ... You must be informed that partly by my Father's desire I have added a singing Master to my other teachers of polite accomplishments – by name [Theophilus Anthony] Bucher, a name famous, I believe, in the Musical World.

[footnote] [9] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/ 90, pp. 2–3. [/footnote]

Hannah's harp is the most written about instrument in all of the family archive. Her father bought her a new instrument in May or June 1835, as recorded in the household accounts for 26 May, that is, a few months after her letter to William in February:

Paid Robert Purdie, Music Seller Edinburgh for a double action Harp by Erard No. 4545, £177.

[footnote] [10] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 19/ 2/ 2. [/footnote]

The cost of the harp itself seems to be at the more expensive end of the price range. Erard was a London-based harp and piano manufactory, and the price tag of £177 is well in excess of one of their London competitors, namely Baldwin-Erat, where in the late 1820s the most expensive double-action harp cost £115.

[footnote] [11] Mike Baldwin, 'The Erat harp manufactory: painted and gilded decoration 1821–1826', *The Galpin Society Journal*, vol. 66, Nov. 2012, p. 15, <a

http://www.downeyharps.com/gsj66_Baldwin_Erat.pdf>http://www.downeyharps.com/gsj66_Baldwin_Erat.pdf, accessed 2 June 2019. [/footnote]

In June 1835, Hannah Ann wrote to William of her new instrument almost in passing:

Have you heard any thing of your allowance lately – I have got a Harp – Aunt Charles begs, with her love that you will take a box of pills in your pocket, on your tour ...

[footnote] [12] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/95, p. 2.
[/footnote]

The exclamation ‘I have got a Harp’ indicates that Hannah did not have her own instrument when she wrote about her harp practice in February. Although she must have had access to an instrument before this Erard was bought, it is not clear from the Stirling family documents where the earlier instrument came from. None of the existing household inventories includes a harp, and the accounts do not make any reference to buying or hiring an instrument, or even maintaining one by buying harp strings.

As for the singing teacher named in this letter, Theophilus Anthony Bucher (c. 1802–1871), he was indeed a renowned voice teacher in Edinburgh at this time. He was French, originally a flautist and something of a composer publishing vocal exercises and:

several highly-artistic songs

[footnote] [13] David Baptie, *Musical Scotland*, p. 24.
[/footnote]

There are very few references to Hannah’s musical education in letters from family members. One relative, whose name is difficult to decipher, writes from Mannheim am Rhein in December 1837:

How are you getting on with music. Did you not take lessons upon the Harp? It is not an instrument much played in Germany.

[footnote] [14] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 27/16/3, p. 2.
[/footnote]

Unfortunately, some months prior to receiving this encouraging letter from Mannheim, her father had written rather unfavourably of her harp playing:

27 M[] 1837

My dear you might have had lessons from Miss Gelsin at this time – after all the past expenses of the Harp &c. &c. ... consequently if I had known the little proficiency you have had I should not have permitted the measure at all.

[footnote] [15] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 27/18/13, p. 3.
[/footnote]

As to Hannah Ann's proficiency at the piano, there seems to be no reference in the surviving family documents. However, her diaries do show again that she practised several hours a day, as demonstrated, for example, from entries in her 1843 diary:

17 January, ... I practised Schubert yesterday and today ...

18 January, ... practised Beethoven ...

23 January, Late in the morning, mild day, practised Beethoven's two pieces 1½ hours ...

24 January, ... practised Chopin ...

[footnote] [16] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 27/7. [/footnote]

It is frustrating that these diary entries do not record which pieces she was practising, although if writing for herself there would be no reason to do so. However, there are receipts from various music shops in Edinburgh and London among the many payment vouchers relating to her personal expenses that provide some clues. These show that Hannah's purchases included Beethoven Sonatas Op. 13, Op. 26, and Op. 27 N° 1, each of which is manageable by any competent player, Chopin's Mazurkas Set 2, and various sets of studies by Henri-Jérôme Bertini (1798–1876) and Sir Julius Benedict (1804–1885). William also bought some music for Hannah, for example, writing from Brussels during one of his continental tours:

I had asked Jessy [Paterson] about music for you before your letter came, & have a cylinder of tuneful novelties buried among my books ...

[footnote] [17] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/46.
[/footnote]

If Hannah Ann was able to play piano works such as those named in the purchase vouchers, then she will have possessed enough musical knowledge to be able to describe the music that she heard at the various concerts recorded among the ticket

purchases in her personal accounts, a skill that, from the exchanges in their letters, William claims to lack.

Given the length and regularity of Hannah's practice sessions, others in the household must have been listening to her at the piano. Yet it has so far proved impossible to find anyone who describes her playing in writing.

Hannah Ann's listening experiences

Hannah's letters do not provide much information about the concerts that she attended, although her personal expenses record regular spending on musical activities. Taking the 1841 London Season as a sample year, she bought tickets for two performances of 'Ancient Music', attended the festival at St Paul's, took a box at the German opera, and heard Liszt in recital.

[footnote] [18] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 27/ 9. [/footnote]

None of these experiences are included in her letters to William. Instead, she tends to refer to music as incidental to family and social events particularly in Edinburgh, Kinfauns Castle, and the family home at Keir.

[footnote] [19] For information about Kinfauns Castle and Keir House see the CANMORE website: <https://canmore.org.uk/> https://canmore.org.uk [/footnote]

Hannah depicts Edinburgh as a place for formal balls, tea drinking, and private musical soirées. In contrast, life at Keir and Kinfauns exudes a more relaxed atmosphere, for example:

... At Keir... music & dancing, & bagpiping & reeling & jigging in the Drawing Room... (11 August 1835)

[footnote] [20] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 96, p. 2. [/footnote]

A similarly relaxed evening is recounted from Kinfauns in May 1836 when Hannah writes:

... I was highly amused the other Evening with a would be young man in the shape of an officer of the 25 Highlanders – who distracted our ears with chattering nonsense & playing

infamously on the piano! Thank goodness you don't practice to be musical...

[footnote] [21] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 110, p. 4.

[/footnote]

Each of these events focuses on music-making for those most easily described as 'above stairs'. However, in one second-hand report, Hannah refers to a letter from their Aunt Marnie describing the New Year celebrations of 1839 at Kinfauns. From this we learn that one of the house guests, a Miss Macgregor, asked permission to join the celebrations below stairs and joined the dancing in the laundry and took supper in the housekeeper's room.

[footnote] [22] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 135 i-ii, p. 4 [/footnote]

It may have been the spirit of the season that allowed such mixing to take place and receive a positive report.

A couple of Hannah's letters from her foreign holidays indicate that she did seek out musical performances while on her travels. For example, the thwarted attempt in June 1837 to hear the choir at St Patrick's Cathedral, Dublin:

I have met with a disappointment to day, having resolved to hear the singing at St Patrick's Cathedral, Milne & I sallied forth, about 3 o'clock; which the people here told us was the proper time, & after giving us directions where to find the Cathedral, we quickly reached it, went in & found a regiment of charity children receiving instruction from teachers of different sizes & ages, & from not one ... could we learn distinctly whither this was the cathedral...

[footnote] [23] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 118, p. 2.

[/footnote]

The only other surviving instance of Hannah writing about music to William comes a few years later while on a tour of the continent in June 1840. When she reached Switzerland, she writes from Thun:

You will have heard therefore all about our travels. I need not go over my raptures at ... sailing on the lake [Geneva], seeing Chillon [Castle] & hearing that most wonderful & delightful organ at Fribourg. It is important to describe the effect that organ produced in its power & sweetness when the organist played the Hallelujah Chorus. The Cathedral in which it is, is a great deal too

small a building for it, & Louis Philippe, like a second Napoleon, is doing all he can to get the organ into France, Which it is to be hoped the Fribourglians will have spirit enough to resist.

[footnote] [24] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 139, p. 1.

[/footnote]

The organ that Hannah Ann heard at St Nicholas Cathedral was still relatively new, having been completed in 1834 by Aloys Mooser.

[footnote] [25] See <https://www.fribourgtourisme.ch/en/P8719/mooser-organ-cathedrale-st-nicholas>, accessed 6 October 2018. [/footnote]

It is interesting that she writes not only about the quality of the sound, but the effect of the instrument within the space. It is difficult to establish from her letters and diaries how well qualified she was to judge the suitability of the size of the instrument for the building, since this is an isolated comment on this particular issue. Her comments may instead be a general comparison of the sound of a continental organ with those that she heard in various British cities. Nowhere among her existing papers is there any description of the effect of the sound of any instrument or ensemble within a performing space.

William's listening experiences

Turning now to William, we find him creating a language that communicates what he is experiencing at musical performances, not only in his letters to Hannah Ann, but also in his personal diaries. What also emerges from these documents is some evidence of William's close listening skills, despite his continued protestations of knowing little about music. His earliest surviving descriptions of these listening experiences come in two letters written in April and June 1837.

In London, on 4 April 1837, he attended a performance of *Belisario*, by Donizetti, which *The Times* describes as having had its first performance in Britain a few days earlier on 1 April.

[footnote] [26] *The Times Digital Archive*, Friday 31 March 1837, p. 4, issue 16378, <https://bit.ly/2YaMFlo>, accessed 6 October 2018. [/footnote]

William wrote to Hannah the following day:

I went last night to the opera Belisario [by Donizetti] was acted there were no particularly great performers. It is not a favourite opera. Yet there were two or three pieces which I admired – a Mad^{lle} De Angioli was the prima donna – she was pretty and sometimes sang well. But the great fault I find with second rate singers is that they imitate their betters in their bad acting and not in their good singing. Duvernay danced beautifully – particularly in one dance with Castanets – it was a pas seul but I forget the name of it ...

[footnote] [27] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/15, pp. 3–4.
[/footnote]

His diary entry on 4 April for the same performance simply records the barest facts of the event and reads:

To opera 'Belisario' Sig^r Galli, [Signor] De Val, Mad^e Giannoni, M^{lle} De Angioli (very pretty) Ballet 'Beniowsky' Mlle Duvernay (in Cachoucha) & [Mlle Herminie] Elsler.

[footnote] [28] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/5. [/footnote]

The contrast in William's approach to recording this event in his diary and in the letter to Hannah is typical of his writing style in different types of document. As mentioned above, William seems to use the diary as a simple personal record, as an aide memoire that was not created to be read by others or to provide notes for later use, although he may have referred to it when composing his letters. He rarely writes in sentences, and the barest details are written down, as in the example above.

The letter to Hannah, on the other hand, strives to convey his experience of the evening and includes some perceptive comments on the singing and effect of the acting and dancing. His appraisal of Mad^{lle} De Angioli as one who 'sometimes sang well' suggests that William had developed a discerning ear and a more sophisticated appreciation of opera singing than he considered to be within his ability. This phrase may also suggest that he was capable of a certain level of concentrated listening that allowed him to make an immediate assessment of the performance of a single voice within the whole and identify which pieces were sung better than others. The telling statement 'second rate singers ... imitate their betters in their bad acting and not in their good singing' again indicates an ability for focused listening and observing, as well as a familiarity with operatic performances and the expectations he formed by frequently attending throughout the season.

There is no explicit evidence in William's diaries and letters to suggest that he went to the opera in London in the company of friends or relatives, in other words, because of a social expectation. On the contrary, he often seems to go alone, which in itself indicates a genuine interest in music. Additionally, his writings demonstrate that he had the ability to carry previous listening experiences in his head, which equipped him to compare different performers and performances.

He does not explain why *Belisario* is not 'a favourite opera'. The first British performance had taken place only a few days earlier and he may have been influenced by local reports or conversation within his social circle. Or perhaps this is his more personal view based on his judgement of talent when he tells Hannah that there were 'no particularly great performers'. This letter also shows his effort to describe the whole event, referring to the singers, dancers, and something of the visual impact, an approach developed more fully in later letters discussed below. Indeed, one could speculate that the reason William's listening experiences are dominated by opera performances is because of his interest in the spectacle of the event which satisfied his growing interest in the visual arts.

A couple of months later, in June 1837, he writes again to Hannah:

I have seen several operas – the Characters by the same people that were here last year with the exception of Albertazzi, who is a great addition. He both acts & sings well – Pasta is at Covent Garden & Madame Schroeder Devrient at Drury Lane – I like Pasta's singing better than any I have ever heard – I wish you were here, to enjoy all these musicians, who are thrown away upon me, I suppose.

[footnote] [29] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/1/18, p. 4.

[/footnote]

Again, this is a much more detailed account than the record in his diary:

7th June 1837 ... to Drury Lane Theatre in evening & saw Taglioni in La Sylphid – danced beautifully ... also Mad^e Schroeder Devrient fine singer in Opera.

[footnote] [30] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. [/footnote]

There are several points worth pulling out when comparing these two documents. Firstly, there is an attempt in the letter to compare Pasta's singing with that of Madame Schroeder Devrient, even if only at a superficial level. This provides further evidence

that William had a certain ability to hold a previously-heard sound in his mind while listening to a new performance and comparing the two. Or, at the very least, to compare his emotional and physical reactions to different performers, and use this rounder experience to create a listening memory that allowed him to express a preference.

His reference to Pasta being at Covent Garden, and to her singing in general, presents something of a puzzle. The diary for 1837 refers only to attending performances at Drury Lane; there is no mention of him going to Covent Garden. Also, there is no evidence in any of William's surviving documents of attending a performance involving a singer by the name of Pasta. This is presumably Giuditta Pasta (1798–1865), one of the most celebrated sopranos of her generation, who created title roles in works by, among others, Bellini and Donizetti.

[footnote] [31] Kenneth Stern, *Grove Music Online*, <https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.21047>, accessed 21 November 2018. [/footnote]

Secondly, the letter and diary differ in their choice of performers to describe. While Hannah is told about Albertazzi's abilities as an opera singer who 'both acts & sings well', for himself, William records his estimation of the dancer Taglioni who 'danced beautifully' and the 'fine singer' Madame Schroeder Devrient. Perhaps he chose to return to the issue raised in his April letter of singers being able to act, or not, when writing to Hannah to continue that thread of discussion. As for his record of Taglioni in his diary, again one might speculate that the more purely visual impact of the dance captured his developing appreciation of the visual arts.

Within these records of operatic and ballet experiences, we can see William's listening developing along two distinct and complementary paths: his listening skills and his listening memory. His listening skills were clearly being developed through frequent exposure to music. By this means, he will have been able to accumulate a knowledge of vocal proficiency and discern the style of music that he preferred. This is demonstrated in his writings where, for example, he tells Hannah that De Angioli 'sometimes sang well'. This suggests that he had a mental standard that De Angioli sometimes met during a single performance. His listening memory allowed him to compare performances, singers, and styles of music, across a longer time span, for example, his comparative comments on Pasta and Schroeder Devrient.

Parallel to these listening skills, we can see William's developing appreciation of the visual side of theatrical performances through his notes about the ballet.

Another instance where William demonstrates his ability to recall a particular sound that can be compared with a more recent listening experience is found in his diary for 19 June 1838, when he writes about hearing the famous organ in the Grote Kerk, or St-Bavokerk, Haarlem:

... went to the Church & saw & heard the great organ. The organist played for us for about an hour. Magnificent tones & almost equal in effect to a quier [sic] of voices Tho' I believe the new organs [at] Birmingham & York are almost as powerful, I should think this has greater variety of notes. The Maker [Christiaan Müller] of this one built [one] also in Trin[ity] Coll[ege]. The outside is magnificently ornamented, the pipes are partly left their natural colour & partly gilded & there is an heraldic & other devices in wood painted white, which has the effect of silver – if anything it is too elaborately ornamented.

[footnote] [32] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5; http://www.bavo.nl/en/about-bavo-and-nieuwe-kerk/grote-of-st-bavo/organ/, accessed 6 October 2018. [/footnote]

A visit to the St Bavokerk and hearing the organ was popular with British travellers on their continental tours during the later eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Those who wrote about this instrument comment on its size, tone, and power, such as Lowell Mason who heard it in 1853 and like William compared it to the instrument in Birmingham Town Hall:

It [the Haarlem organ]... is famed for its size the world over. We thought it as good as it is great, and listened to its tones with delight. It is indeed very powerful ... There are now several organs as large, or larger, for example, the organ in the Town Hall, at Birmingham...

[footnote] [33] https://led.kmi.open.ac.uk/entity/lexp/1462037999108, accessed 22 November 2018. [/footnote]

William's account presents more of a challenge to one's musical memory, recalling the sound of two organs in different cities in England and managing to write a comparison with that being heard at Haarlem. A comparison with an instrument at Trinity College

may have been easier for William, since he must have had many opportunities to become familiar with its sound while studying there. Although this was, no doubt, a much smaller instrument at the time than that at Haarlem. Much more difficult is the recall of the sound of instruments that may have been heard less frequently and possibly with the experiences separated by the passage of time, that is the organs in Birmingham and York. However, the difference in construction between British and continental organ builders combined with the aural impact of each instrument in their respective space may have helped to imprint the sound in William's musical memory. Once again, it seems unlikely that someone with little interest in music would write in this manner for themselves. That William does so demonstrates an ability to recall the overall effect and range of stops on these organs.

As with his earlier descriptions of opera and ballet performances, we see William striving to capture the full experience of the musical and the visual impact of the instrument at Haarlem. He writes about the manner of decoration on the casing and pipes, all of which he considers to be excessive. He may himself have been conscious of his drifting between writing about the musical and visual experience of an occasion. When writing to Hannah from Munich in September 1839, William astutely comments that he:

saw & heard some opera & ballet

[footnote] [34] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 33, p. 3.

[/footnote]

and likens this to his:

doings or rather seeings & hearings at Vienna.

[footnote] [35] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 33, p. 3.

[/footnote]

There is more behind these comments than trying to find a common visual reference point that will help Hannah understand his experiences. Instead, what emerges is one who is developing as an art historian, and who fixes on specific visual effects which may not have been within Hannah's experience, at least as far as can be determined from her personal archive. For example, William's description of the rooftop promenades of Milan Cathedral:

I climbed among the thousand spires of the glorious white marble cathedral of this city

[footnote] [36] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 35, p. 4.

[/footnote]

While in Milan, he attended the opera, choosing to describe the opera house ...

the magnificent La Scala

[footnote] [37] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 35, p. 4.

[/footnote]

... instead of the performance of Donizetti's Robert Devereux.

William's descriptive language

On the whole, William's language is never gushing, either in the letters or his diaries, no matter what he is writing about – music, art works, reading, or his various travelling adventures. The word he tends to use most often among the earliest documents to describe enjoyable musical experiences is 'fine'.

[footnote] [38] For a discussion of the difference in descriptive language used by those who listen casually compared with those who listen intensively, see David Rowland, 'Listeners in Britain c. 1780–1830, Nineteenth-Century Music Review, forthcoming. This survey suggests that 'fine' is used by all categories of listener, whereas other terms such as 'sublime' tend to be used by more attentive listeners. [/footnote]

This use of 'fine' is restricted to his diaries; it is never found in his letters to Hannah Ann. For example, he describes the singing at Trinity College, Cambridge, as:

18th October 1835, Evening chapel, fine singing

[footnote] [39] Glasgow City Archives T-SK 28/ 4. [/footnote]

And that at another unnamed Cambridge college:

17th October 1835 ... the whole music very fine

[footnote] [40] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 4. [/footnote]

As already seen above, his diary descriptions of more public performances are equally brief, both in terms of his reaction to individual performers as well as his estimation of the music itself. Thus, the dancer Carlotta Grisi, on 12 April 1836:

came out fine

[footnote] [41] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 4. [/footnote]

While the last act of Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* on 18 June 1836 is:

very fine

[footnote] [42] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 4. [/footnote]

Even when William does not rate the performance highly, his description remains brief:

22nd March 1837, at the Opera in the evening very dull

[footnote] [43] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. [/footnote]

Reading through all of William's diaries for the period under investigation, it is noticeable that from 1838 he changes his favoured adjective from 'fine' to 'good'. Could it be that 'fine' was the standard vocabulary among his contemporaries at Trinity College, Cambridge, during his early years there? His use of 'good' is a straightforward replacement and it is easy to find comparable examples with his previous use of 'fine'. An orchestral concert on 13 March 1838 is:

pretty good

[footnote] [44] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. [/footnote]

while a performance by the ballet dancer Taglioni on 1 May 1838 is:

very good

[footnote] [45] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. [/footnote]

and an opera performance at Leipzig on 7 July 1838 is recorded as:

Music very good

[footnote] [46] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 28/ 5. [/footnote]

William's descriptive language is quite different and richer when referring to buildings and towns. For example, Bristol Cathedral is 'handsome' and many of the towns and gardens that he visits on his travels are 'beautiful'. In his letters to Hannah Ann, William does at times strive to give her a more rounded description of his experiences and, although his language remains quite restricted, he does develop a more expanded style that more fully conjures up the scene as it was before his eyes.

An example of this combination of William describing the musical and visual is found in a letter to Hannah dated 2 December 1841, where we find a rather scathing account of an opera performance in Seville:

At Seville I saw an opera called Il Solitario by an ecclesiastic [Miguel Hilarión Eslava (1807–1878)] of great musical genius there – which is esteemed a masterpiece of music – It seemed pretty good – but not being a judge of these matters can not say how far this Prophet deserved the singular good fortune of being of ‘honour in his own country’ – The Theatre was fitted up in the Moorish style of architecture – arches & slender columns admirably adapted for such buildings. – Then light galleries covered with gilding & coloured tracery and fitted with the beauties of Seville all of a flutter with faces & mantillas would have afforded a very pleasant hours amusement, had the curtain never risen, nor the orchestra struck up ...

[footnote] [47] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 52ii, p. 2; Chase, Gilbert, The Music of Spain, p. 140, for an outline of the brief success of operas by Eslava. [/footnote]

By this date, William had attended many opera performances, and was probably more equipped to offer judgement on the quality of the music than he suggests here. Yet he does not attempt to describe the sound of the music, or even the performers. Instead, he focuses on the architectural details around him in which he is able to perceive the distinctive Moorish elements in the design of the arches and columns. He then writes about the audience, and the fashions worn by the ladies and their antics in their seats. All of this was clearly more appealing to him than the music and seems to have provided more entertainment. It was soon after this first visit to Spain that William decided to make a serious study of Spanish art, for which he is now best remembered both as a scholar and collector.

There is, however, one letter where William writes more clearly about the sound of the music he heard and its effect. During a visit to Rome in January 1840, he encountered two instances of music in the streets: a funeral procession, and the traditional itinerant folk bands that emerge at Christmas:

Another of the sights of the street are the funerals with their processions of torch-bearing dolefully chanting priests before – the coffinless body borne on a bier & covered only with a pall, and a number of mourners ghastly ghostly looking pagans wrapped

from head to foot in black or white cloth ... Then about Christmas for two or three months there come bag-pipes 'pifferari' – from the hills of Calabria – dressed in sheep skins and other old age sober attire and pour forth their wailing melodies at the shrines of the Virgin at the corners of the streets. The company usually consists of three persons – 2 men & a boy – & the performance of the concert is a wild melancholy air to condole with the blessed Virgin and afterward a merrier measure to awake the Baby. At least this is the reason themselves assign for unvaryingly following such an order of music. The Calabrian Pipes are much larger & have much more serenity and modulation than ours – they are not very sightly instruments but I daresay might be made very smart by means of silver keys & silken streamers. I am so fond of them that if I ever learn any instrument I think I shall choose the said pipes. Don't you think a duet with Sir John Mackenzie on his violincello [sic] would much promote the harmony of a Christmas party. For the present I have contented myself with causing to be painted the portraits of the three most illustrious pifferari who ... make a very pretty little picture.

[footnote] [48] Glasgow City Archives, T-SK 29/ 1/ 137, p. 2–3.

[/footnote]

This document is rich with musical information, especially with respect to the folk musicians, their music, and instruments. William clearly uses the term 'pifferari' to refer to the musicians and indicates the composition of each team, two men and a boy. His description of their instruments and comparison with the Scottish bagpipes is accurate. He must have seen the larger version of the Italian bagpipes which has two chanters, the longer of the two often being over 150cm; the single chanter on the Scottish pipes is about one third of that length, at around 50cm.

[footnote] [49] William A. Cocks, Anthony C. Baines and Roderick D. Cannon, 'Bagpipe' section 7.iii., Grove Music Online, https://doi-org.libezproxy.open.ac.uk/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.01773, accessed 6 October 2018. [/footnote]

Finally, he notes that each performance comprises a set of two tunes that are always played in the same order: the more melancholic for the Virgin followed by something more sprightly for the infant Christ.

This letter also conveys information about William and his social circle at home.

Although he confirms that he does not play an instrument himself, obviously other men

in their normal company did. (There are numerous entries in Hannah's and William's diaries, as well as in their letters, that indicate some kind of family performance was a normal part of their Christmas and New Year celebrations. However, it appears that these were more likely to be theatrical performances.)

Conclusion

The recorded listening experiences of Hannah Ann and William Stirling present something of a conundrum. While Hannah is the one who received instrumental tuition and diligently practised, she writes little to William about her experience of going to concerts. William, on the other hand, is content to present himself as completely ignorant in musical matters in this long-running private joke with his older sister. Yet it is William who writes more frequently about music, and develops a more intensive language to conjure up the whole experience. This may be a disservice to Hannah Ann since we do not have her side of the correspondence written to her friends. She may have written more fully about music to those whom she considered to be more interested in it than William. However, within the confines of this set of letters, it is William who, contrary to his protestations, displays a genuine interest in music. His are not the writings of one who is being forced to attend such performances as a social norm, allowing the music to pass by without due attention. Through his regular listening experiences he develops a useful musical memory whereby he can create his own benchmarks and determine when a singer is performing well, which pieces he prefers, and the comparable effects of British and continental organs. These descriptions combine well with his emerging skills as an art historian, conjuring up a tangible scene of the whole musical and visual experience.

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