

## THE FIRST EDINBURGH MUSICAL FESTIVAL: ‘SERIOUS AND MAGNIFICENT ENTERTAINMENT’, OR ‘A COMBINATION OF HARMONIOUS AND DISCORDANT NOTES’?<sup>1</sup>

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On the first morning of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival, sunshine was blazing into a packed Parliament Hall, and the sense of excitement was almost tangible. Prudently, the stewards had been instructed to let in only a dozen people at a time. The crowd of people queuing to get into the venue was so overwhelming that ladies hung back, hesitating to go in for fear that they might be injured in the crush, or their dresses might get damaged. These concerts were a prestigious occurrence in Edinburgh’s social calendar, and appearances were all-important. Indeed, the ladies’ beautiful outfits were directly mentioned in the *Caledonian Mercury*, and mentioned again in the report written after the event by 25-year old George Farquhar Graham, one of the festival committee secretaries.<sup>2</sup>

Anticipating the start of the performance, everyone was struck by the ‘large and beautiful orchestra’, and the ‘well-dressed persons’ in the gallery. In Graham’s own words,

‘the novelty of the occasion, the spaciousness of the place, whose high walls, and massive sober ornaments were illuminated by the bright beams of the morning sun, together with the expectation of the serious and magnificent entertainment . . . [produced] . . . a state of mental elevation and delight, rarely to be experienced.’

Parliament Hall was an excellent venue for an event as significant as the First Edinburgh Musical Festival. The *Caledonian Mercury* noted that it had been ‘fitted up’ for the occasion, and the organ, imported from no less than Covent Garden for the occasion, would certainly have been a focal point.

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a bicentennial talk given at Edinburgh Central Library on 30 October 2015.

<sup>2</sup> George Farquhar Graham, *Account of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival, held between the 30th October and 5th November, 1815*. Edinburgh: printed by James Ballantyne and Co. for William Blackwood . . . , 1816, available online via the National Library of Scotland’s Digital Gallery <<http://deriv.nls.uk/dcn23/9024/90248546.23.pdf>> [accessed 12 January]. I am also most grateful to Edinburgh historian Eleanor Harris for sharing her transcriptions from the *Caledonian Mercury* newspaper with me. Nationwide holdings can be sourced via <<http://sunecat.ac.uk/search>> [accessed 12 January 2016]

AN  
ACCOUNT  
OF THE  
FIRST EDINBURGH  
MUSICAL FESTIVAL,  
HELD BETWEEN  
*The 30th October and 5th November, 1815.*  
TO WHICH IS ADDED  
AN ESSAY,  
CONTAINING SOME  
GENERAL OBSERVATIONS ON MUSIC.  

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BY  
GEORGE FARQUHAR GRAHAM, Esq.  

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EDINBURGH:  
*Printed by James Ballantyne and Co.*  
FOR WILLIAM BLACKWOOD, EDINBURGH; AND BALDWIN  
CRADOCK AND JOY, PATERNOSTER-ROW,  
LONDON.  

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1816.

Fig. 1. Title page of G.F. Graham's account of the First Edinburgh Festival (Bodleian Library, 17402 f.50) © Bodleian Libraries, University of Oxford.

The installation of such a huge instrument would have been a complicated and time-consuming task, but no expense was spared in preparing the venue for the musical feast that was about to unfold. On 31<sup>st</sup> August, the *Caledonian Mercury* had reported that, ‘The large organ, which is used at the annual oratorios, in London during Lent, is every day expected to arrive at Leith for the occasion.’ Shipping it up the east coast by sea would have been quicker and smoother than any form of land transportation. There would then have been about eight weeks in which to assemble it in the Parliament Hall.

Walter Scott’s friend James Skene made two paintings of the organ in pride of place in Parliament Hall; they not only survive, but are held by Edinburgh City Library. The paintings were actually done during the second, 1819 Festival, but the view would doubtless have looked very similar at the first, and indeed at the third one which took place in 1824.<sup>3</sup>

Not all the concerts were to take place in the Parliament Hall, though. Whilst sacred concerts were held in Parliament Hall in the mornings, a local theatre known at the time as Corri’s Rooms (after the proprietor, Natale Corri) had also been adapted for the evening performances. The Corri family all combined music and commerce one way or another: Natale ran a music shop as well the theatre; his older brother Domenico Corri had publishing interests in London as well as Edinburgh, but had also played for Edinburgh Musical Society for nearly 20 years at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; and Domenico’s sons were also in the trade, one in Edinburgh and the other in London. Natale’s reputation would have benefited by association with such a prestigious festival.

Whilst Edinburgh’s First Musical Festival was a high point in Edinburgh’s cultural history, it comes quite late in the history of music festivals in general. There were various factors that gave rise to the birth of the music festival as a phenomenon in Britain, and the very earliest forerunners were probably the celebrations that took place on St Cecilia’s Day – the patron saint of music.

During the eighteenth century, the overwhelming enthusiasm for Georg Frederic Handel’s music – particularly his oratorios – gave rise to whole concerts and festivals devoted largely or entirely to the performance of his works. This began in Handel’s lifetime. In addition to other fund-raising oratorio performances, Handel used his most famous work, *Messiah*, to raise funds for London’s Foundling Hospital. When he died in 1759, he left the score and a set of parts to the hospital so that they could continue to give performances of it as a way of raising much-needed funds.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Both can also be viewed on the Scran website <<http://scran.ac.uk/>> [accessed 11 January 2016]

<sup>4</sup> The Gerald Coke Handel Collection at the Foundling Museum in London is an excellent source of information about Handel’s charitable work <<http://foundlingmuseum.org.uk/about/gerald-coke-handel-collection/>> [accessed 11 Jan 2016]

Gradually, a wave of music-festival mania spread around the country, and any provincial town worth its salt began to realise the income-raising potential of a series of concerts over several days, performing music by Handel – and others – to raise funds for local hospitals, asylums and other charitable enterprises. The Three Choirs festival in Gloucester, Worcester and Hereford already had its beginnings in the early eighteenth century, so they are seen as part of the early history of the movement, but gradually more and more festivals took place. Besides the Three Choirs, not to mention Bath, Bristol and Salisbury in the south, there were notable festivals in Oxford, Cambridge and Norwich; Coventry, Birmingham and York; Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield and Manchester.

A pattern began to develop, of roughly three oratorio concerts in the mornings, at which either whole or a selection of excerpts of oratorios and other sacred works would be performed – and three more miscellaneous, secular concerts in the evenings. Where a cathedral or abbey church might be used for the sacred concerts, other suitable venues might be used for the evening events.

The most famous Handel-related events were, of course, the musical performances in Westminster Abbey and the Pantheon Theatre to commemorate Handel's 'Centenary' in 1784.<sup>5</sup> There were six concerts in total, to raise money for The Fund for the Support of Decayed Musicians and their Families. The grand sum of £12,837 was raised, and after the bills had been paid, £6,000 was paid to the Decayed Musicians fund and £1,000 to Westminster Hospital. The event served as inspiration for subsequent music festivals in the provinces, and doubtless influenced the organisers of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival.

A lengthy report had been written by Dr Charles Burney, one of the most eminent music historians of the day, who had already authored his *General History of Music* in 1776.<sup>6</sup> Burney's report contains much analytical detail, and a close analysis of Handel's *Messiah*, which was performed on Saturday 29<sup>th</sup> May, 1784, along with a picture of the performance in Westminster Abbey.<sup>7</sup> The youthful George Farquhar Graham had good reason to be grateful for Burney's work, for he was able to quote extensively from it at various points in his own report of the 1815 Edinburgh Festival – and Burney's

<sup>5</sup> Although Handel's dates are commonly given as 1685-1750, the 1784 centenary was calculated using the old calendar; the adjustment of calendar dates in 1752 under the provisions of the Calendar Act explains the apparent discrepancy.

<sup>6</sup> Charles Burney, *A general history of music: from the earliest ages to the present period. To which is prefixed, A dissertation on the music of the ancients*. London: printed for the author: and sold by T. Becket; J. Robson; and G. Robinson, 1776.

<sup>7</sup> Charles Burney, *An account of the musical performances in Westminster-Abbey, and the Pantheon: May 26th, 27th, 29th; and June the 3d, and 5th, 1784: In commemoration of Handel*. London: printed for the benefit of the musical fund, and sold by T. Payne and Son, 1784.

commentary on *Messiah* was quoted in full in an appendix to the Edinburgh report, with due acknowledgment.

Other factors also had a bearing on the decision to have a music festival. In the eighteenth century, the Edinburgh Musical Society had provided for the entertainment of well-to-do music lovers; its waning by the end of the century left a gap that was clearly ripe to be filled. The *Caledonian Mercury* declared that Scottish ears were ‘naturally correct’, but that they were now ready for the genuine harmony to be found in sacred oratorios, and would undoubtedly be delighted by a chorus and orchestra twice the size of anything they had yet experienced.

Young George Farquhar Graham expressed the opinion that up until now there had been far too much dependence on simple Scottish tunes, and that it was time to move beyond this narrow obsession, to learn to appreciate a wider range of music. Listening to classical music, in the form of ‘solid and elegant compositions’, was not only a delightfully enjoyable way to spend one’s time, but could also be sublimely uplifting. And, he added, to those only familiar with tuneless screeching in church, well-performed sacred music would contribute enormously to their devotional experience.

Whatever discussions had been taking place mooted the idea of a music festival, an Italian soprano called Angelica Catalani may inadvertently have given Edinburgh the nudge it needed to start organising one. Catalani was an operatic superstar who had travelled Europe widely, spent some time singing in London’s King’s Theatre between 1806-14, and was a very big name on the festival circuit. In May 1814, she announced in the *Caledonian Mercury* that she proposed to visit Edinburgh in November with a ‘Complete Company of the best London performers, both vocal and instrumental, Solo-concerto players as well as Oratorio choristers; and thus to produce festivals on the same grand and liberal plan with those lately given in Liverpool . . . and to allot one entire FIFTH part of the total receipts for the benefit of such Public Charities as shall be thought best. . . .’ She named the august titled and highly-placed individuals whom she considered might form an organising committee.

In fact, Madame Catalani was not only a famous singer but also a concert impresario. It would appear that on this occasion, her selection of august individuals didn’t bite; and although Edinburgh had its First Musical Festival the following year, Catalani was not part of it!

Instead, 30<sup>th</sup> November 1814 saw a ‘Meeting of Noblemen and Gentlemen, called by Circular Letters, and held in the Council-Chamber’, with the Right Honourable the Lord Provost in the Chair. Graham’s *Account* narrates how those present noted the remarkable success of other festivals in raising money for needy charities, and resolved to attempt something similar in Edinburgh. Whilst the Westminster Handel celebrations had consisted of five concert

days extending over one-and-a-half weeks, the 1815 Edinburgh festival was to take place over five consecutive days; the performance of Handel's *Messiah* would still occur on the third, middle day. It was decided to have a total of six performances, three in the mornings, of oratorios or sacred selections, and three evening concerts of miscellaneous pieces.

The Nobility of Scotland were requested to patronise the festival, and office-bearers were selected – a President, six Vice-Presidents, 30 Extraordinary and 25 Ordinary Directors (they did the work); a Treasurer, and last but not least, two Secretaries. The Duke of Buccleuch and Queensberry was asked to be President. Key Edinburgh personages appeared in the list of Extraordinary Directors, starting with the Lord Provost, Lord President, Lord Justice Clerk, Lord Chief Baron, The Lord Advocate and the Solicitor General. Other names in both lists of directors stand out as having been influential in their day, but are perhaps known only to historians now. All, that is, but one: Walter Scott was the last-named Extraordinary Director.

Of the two secretaries appointed to administer the Festival, the younger man, George Farquhar Graham, had initially attended Edinburgh University to study law, but apparently ceased his studies for health reasons. This didn't hold him back: he subsequently made a European tour, travelling in France and Italy, and seems also to have studied with Beethoven whilst abroad. Graham composed an oratorio, now seemingly lost, especially for performance at the First Edinburgh Musical Festival. After writing all 213 pages of his *Account of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival*, he was to make his living writing about music, theorizing about music pedagogy; studying, transcribing and arranging Scottish music. He was a rising star in music scholarship, although born in an era when the study of music was not yet a university discipline. In fact, the young man who was so disparaging about his countrymen's obsession with Scottish tunes, was in his middle age to be the editor and arranger of the nineteenth century's best-selling and longest-lasting song collections, the *Songs of Scotland*, in three fat volumes, complete with substantial and erudite annotations.<sup>8</sup> Not only was there was money to be made from these songs, but Graham became one of the nation's experts in them, engaging in earnest discussions and arguments with some of the greatest names in the field.

His co-secretary, just a little older, was George Hogarth, also a music critic and journalist. He was later to publish a substantial *Musical History, Biography and Criticism*, in 1835. A friend of Walter Scott, he is now known primarily as the father-in-law of Charles Dickens. His name barely crops up in Graham's Festival report, so his role in arranging the Festival is rather vague.

<sup>8</sup> George Farquhar Graham, *The Songs of Scotland*, 3 vols, Edinburgh: John Muir Wood, 1848-9.

## **Planning the Festival**

The usual practice in provincial music festivals was to engage top performers as soloists and orchestral leaders – often but not necessarily from London – but also to use local musicians, whether a local organist, or theatre or music society instrumentalists. A ‘music society’ was rather different from those of today. Professional musicians were paid to play in concerts by the music society, whose members were wealthy music lovers from the upper echelons of society and landed gentry. Only occasionally would dilettante society members join in and play with the paid musicians.

The music festival circuit was a profitable one, and some top-flight musicians made a nice living travelling round the country to play at a succession of festivals. Although money was being raised to aid charitable ventures, the musicians still had to be paid, and there were certainly opportunities for enterprising musicians to capitalise. Madame Catalani was not the only impresario when it came to providing first-rate musicians for regional music festivals. John Ashley, an associate conductor at the Handel Commemorations, saw a chance to jump on the bandwagon, and along with four of his sons, travelled to many towns, also acting as a fixer to arrange, if not the entire orchestra, then certainly the imported professionals. John himself had died by the time of the First Edinburgh festival, but one of his sons conducted at it, two more played viola and cello, and the fourth, who actually died in 1815, had been the singing teacher of Mrs Salmon, one of the two female vocalists at the Edinburgh festival.

To demonstrate the complex criss-crossing of the country by musicians, we can note that besides her appearance in Edinburgh, Mrs Salmon can also be traced singing in Derby, Birmingham and York. Meanwhile, Mr Braham, one of the male soloists, sang in Bath in 1809 – he was a pupil of the music director there, a famous castrato called Venanzio Rauzzini. After Edinburgh in 1815, Braham appeared in Birmingham in 1817; Edinburgh again in 1819 and York in 1823. When he wasn’t on tour, he performed in London at the Theatre Royal in Drury Lane. In fact, he had started out as a boy soprano at Covent Garden, and sang in Europe as a young man.

As well as the vocal soloists, the sectional leaders were also often imported by fixers like the Ashleys. These musicians would not only lead the orchestra, but also play solo numbers. Edinburgh was privileged to enjoy the double-bass playing of Dragonetti, a decidedly eccentric but gifted Italian player who rose from humble origins to become a renowned virtuoso. A bachelor who collected dolls as a hobby, he regularly appeared in festivals alongside his very good friend, the cellist and steady family man, Robert Lindley.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Steady, maybe, but Lindley was something of a show-off: there is a story that at one festival – not Edinburgh – Lindley was supporting the continuo for an oratorio aria by Handel, when he provided a lengthy cadenza – including the tune, ‘Over the hills and far away’, in one of the instrumental ‘symphonies’ between vocal sections. This caused him so much amusement and snuff-taking that he could barely settle himself to continue playing thereafter. One wonders how much he unsettled the singer whom he was accompanying!

There was also a Liverpudlian solo flautist called Charles Nicholson, whose claim to fame was that he had invented an improved flute with a much superior tone. So influential was he that a contemporary author on the flute actually dedicated his book to Nicholson. He, too, was in the orchestra for the First Edinburgh Musical Festival.<sup>10</sup>

The local musicians' reputations may have been a little more regional, but they included one of the Corri family at the pianoforte, and Graham's younger friend Finlay Dun. Aged only twenty at the time of the Festival, Dun had started out playing violin for his dance-master father, and eventually became another scholarly expert and Scottish song arranger, most notably for Lady Carolina Nairne; he was also to collaborate first with Graham to publish *A Collection of Celtic Melodies*, and then with John Thomson, first Edinburgh Reid Professor of music, to publish *The Vocal Melodies of Scotland*. Niel Gow's fourth son, Nathaniel, making his name as a dance violinist, music publisher and seller, was also in the violin section, as was James Dewar – a less well-known figure today, but actually one of the founders of the Edinburgh Professional Society of Musicians. James was deputy leader at the Theatre Royal, and his father Daniel had played in Niel Gow's band. The European Schetkys, composer Johann Georg Christoph and his son, were listed as cellist and bassist respectively.

Some indication of the size of the orchestra can be given by the numbers of players in each string section – ten and twelve respectively as first and second violinists, then six viola players, six cellists and five double bassists. Meanwhile, the chorus consisted of twelve sopranos, including Master Harris (presumably a son of Mrs Harris) – and four York boys. (It was not unusual to include boy choristers.) The eleven altos were all male. There were an enviable sixteen tenors, and fifteen basses.

Graham's report tells us that,

‘The sudden burst of the organ, followed by the swell and gradual union of the other instruments in tuning, struck forcibly upon the ears and hearts of all present. All was breathless attention – a momentary pause took place in the orchestra, and the Overture to Esther commenced.’

It's a grand and stately piece, although nowadays we would perhaps expect something a bit more flamboyant to open such a prestigious festival.<sup>11</sup> It was

<sup>10</sup> I have to date been unable to establish whether he might have been a distant ancestor of the renowned Newcastle-born flautist, David Nicholson, who taught at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland until his death a few years ago.

<sup>11</sup> The piece exists in a recent recording conducted by Glasgow Professor John Butt with the Dunedin Consort: Linn Records - Handel: Esther, First reconstructable version (Cannons), 1720

<<http://www.linnrecords.com/recording-handel—esther—cannons-version-1720-.asp>> [accessed 11 Jan 2016]



followed by nine excerpts from various Handel oratorios before the interval, and part of Haydn's *Creation* in the second half. This was new music with a vengeance – Haydn had paid two visits to England in 1790 and 1797, to great acclaim, and he had only died in 1808. A Haydn symphony also opened the second half of the evening concert that day.

About a third of the entire festival programme was by Handel. To put this in some kind of context, it is as though a modern music festival placed a heavy emphasis on Vaughan Williams, Frank Bridge, Bartók or Stravinsky – they were born as many years ago, as Handel was before 1815. Graham did make the observation that audiences should be introduced to modern music, and not be allowed to become fixed upon the music of the past, so maybe he himself sensed that there was too much emphasis on Handel's music, given that it was now 65 years since his death.

About a tenth of the programmed items were by Mozart, with several coming from his opera, *La Clemenza di Tito* – again, Mozart was comparatively modern, since he died at the age of just 36 in 1791. Four substantial items were by Haydn; and the audience was also treated to Beethoven's 'Grand Symphony' – no. 1, in C major (though Graham called it the second) - and a chorus from *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, which had only been premièred twelve years earlier in 1803. Beethoven was a modern phenomenon: born in 1770, he was only 45 at the time of the First Edinburgh Festival, and still had another 13 years ahead of him.

The very first festival performance of oratorio excerpts was on the morning of Tuesday 31<sup>st</sup> October, 1815. The next concert was a secular miscellany in Corri's Rooms on the evening of the Wednesday 1<sup>st</sup> November, followed by a sacred concert – Handel's *Messiah* - in Parliament Hall on the morning of Thursday 2<sup>nd</sup>. Both concerts were packed out, with ladies fainting from fear and pressure from the crush. Burney had likened the Hallelujah Chorus to Dante's depiction of Paradise, saying that it represented the highest triumph of Handel himself.

Such was the demand for tickets, that an extra morning performance was hastily arranged for the Friday, largely featuring music that had already been performed. Those who had been unable to obtain tickets earlier now had a chance to attend after all. This made for a busy day for the poor musicians, who still had another evening concert to get through in Corri's Rooms.

By Saturday lunchtime, it was all over, after a final sacred concert back in Parliament Hall. Again, there was a preponderance of music by Handel, although there was also Mozart, Boyce, Pergolesi, and Beethoven.

Taking the programme as a whole, audience expectations were clearly very different from ours. A concert largely devoted to excerpts from Handel's oratorios would not have great appeal for modern audiences. Indeed, we'd expect to hear an entire oratorio, rather than select excerpts from a number of them!

The same can be said for the evening miscellanies. Excerpts from Mozart's and other operas – arias, duets and trios - interspersed with instrumental solos, duos, trios and secular songs, made for quite a lively variety, even if all but the most famous composers' names are now completely unknown to us today. The programming was more like that of a Classic FM radio broadcast than the entire pieces in concerts of today.

The soloists would undoubtedly have performed the same repertoire in other music festivals on their circuit, and some items were actually the compositions of the soloists who performed them. So, for example, bassist Dragonetti played in a Corelli trio, and played another Corelli piece with violinist Yaniewicz – these were regular parts of their repertoire – not to mention Yaniewicz playing his own violin concerto, Lindley his own cello concerto, and Holmes his bassoon concerto. George Farquhar Graham wrote an oratorio for the occasion; it was probably never published, and seems to have vanished without trace. The singer John Braham included several of his own compositions, but also sang one of his old teacher Rauzzini's songs in his own touring repertoire. Much of this music does still survive in print, even if it's now very rare and generally buried in libraries' special collections. Finding recordings of these rarities proved virtually impossible, and sourcing the printed music more than a little difficult.<sup>12</sup>

Was the Festival a success? Graham's report is a fairly consistent combination of musical analysis and biographical details of the foremost composers, alternating with lavish praise of the soloists. As already mentioned, he drew some of the analysis from Burney's earlier commentary, with due attribution whenever he did so.

According to Graham, Mr Braham's singing was regularly 'brilliant' and 'sublime'. Madame Marconi drew tears with her 'exquisitely pathetic' song in the first morning performance, and displayed 'her usual excellence' the following evening. Haydn's (abbreviated) *Creation* displayed 'mysterious sublimity' – as, for example, in 'the idea of the sublime and awful stillness and solitude which reigned over the forests', not to mention impressions of grandeur and 'sublimity which shakes the frame, and makes the very soul tremble'. Mrs Salmon and Mr Braham gave a 'perfect' rendition of a beautiful aria from Mozart's *Clemenza* at one of the evening concerts, and Mrs Salmon displayed 'her usual very pleasing style' on the Friday morning. One might infer that the soloists consistently performed to a high standard, giving satisfaction to those present, and justifying the high expectations that everyone had of them, not to mention the high cost of the tickets.

<sup>12</sup> For my Edinburgh talk, I was able to find the tune of Braham's, 'Said a smile to a tear', used as the theme for a set of piano variations by Ferdinand Ries. I also sourced Callcott's very lengthy dramatic song, 'Angel of Life', which begins with a recitative, moves into a fast and furious opening, and has a melodious triple-time ending. George Farquhar Graham said he was not going to report on items 'familiar to the public, or which possess only secondary merit'. It is telling that he passed no comment on either of these pieces!

However, after the Wednesday evening concert in Corri's Rooms, a 'plain uninspired man' wrote to the *Caledonian Mercury* to redress the balance to the 'raptures and extacies' that had filled the paper's columns. He enjoyed the sight of the audience in their finery, disliked the sound of the band tuning up, found the first piece 'a combination of harmonious and discordant notes', and couldn't always make out the words – and to make things worse, the programmes with the song-texts hadn't been handed out in time for the start of the concert. When this poor man yawned, so did everyone around him. He enjoyed a Scots song, a horn duet, and a ballad sung by Mr Braham, and said that there was probably only one connoisseur there for every 99 ordinary listeners like himself.

The subscription for a set of six tickets was advertised in the *Caledonian Mercury* as three guineas – a lot of money in those days – whilst single tickets were fifteen shillings each. Fifteen shillings (75p) would be worth at least £50 today, so this was undoubtedly a festival for the wealthy and leisured classes. It raised just under £6,000 in tickets, and after paying all fees and other expenses, such as procuring and installing the organ, improving the Parliament Hall and adapting Corri's Rooms, £1,500 was distributed between seventeen charities. Edinburgh's First Musical Festival had managed to give away a quarter of the proceeds, rather than the fifth that Madame Catalani would have given; on the other hand, who knows what her income and expenditure would have been?

Within a couple of months, a new choral society had been founded in Edinburgh: the Institution for the Encouragement of Sacred Music, directed by Mr Mather, the Festival organist. He originated from Sheffield, but had moved to Edinburgh by 1810 and was the organist of the Episcopalian Charlotte Chapel.

Edinburgh had another Musical Festival in 1819, and Glasgow had one in 1821. Edinburgh returned the favour in 1824, and then another nineteen years passed before there was another in 1843, which ran at a loss. This was the last Edinburgh Musical Festival, until the Edinburgh Festival as we know it began in 1947.

The First Musical Festival of 1815 certainly made its mark at the time, though, and John Crosse's subsequent report of the York Musical Festival of 1823 made extensive reference to it.<sup>13</sup> More recently, John Cranmer's PhD thesis about Edinburgh musical life devoted a few pages to the 1815 festival, and Fiona Palmer's biography of the double bassist Domenico Dragonetti

<sup>13</sup> John Crosse, *An Account of the Grand Musical Festival, Held in September, 1823 in the Cathedral Church of York: For the Benefit of the York County Hospital, and the General Infirmeries at Leeds, Hull, and Sheffield: to which is Prefixed, a Sketch of the Rise and Progress of Musical Festivals in Great Britain; with Biographical and Historical Notes*. York: John Wolstenholme, 1825.

similarly included his Edinburgh appearances.<sup>14</sup> But in most modern commentaries on 19<sup>th</sup> century British music making, it receives only the briefest references; and unfortunately Pippa Drummond's recent book on provincial music festivals from 1784-1914 only covers England, thereby missing out the Edinburgh festivals altogether.<sup>15</sup>

Nonetheless, the bicentenary of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival was something worth commemorating. Thanks are due to historian Eleanor Harris for alerting me to the date and sharing her *Caledonian Mercury* notes with me, not to mention Edinburgh City music librarians, Bronwen Brown and Anne Morrison, who curated an exhibition in the music library and invited me to give an illustrated talk, and Almut Boehme's for her complementary exhibition in the National Library of Scotland. It's fair to say that the occasion was commemorated in style.

### **Abstract**

This article is based on a talk given in Edinburgh Central Library on 30 October 2015 to mark the bicentenary of the First Edinburgh Musical Festival. The author examines contemporary accounts of the Festival and discusses the music performed, the artists who performed it and the social and economic aspects of the Festival, placing it in the context of the increasing popularity of provincial music festivals which spread across Great Britain in the wake of the Handel festivals of the late eighteenth century.

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<sup>14</sup> John Leonard Cranmer, *Concert Life and the Music Trade in Edinburgh c. 1780-c.1830*, doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1991, and online: <<https://www.era.lib.ed.ac.uk/handle/1842/7380>>; and Fiona Palmer, *Domenico Dragonetti in England (1795-1846): the Career of a Double Bass Virtuoso*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997.

<sup>15</sup> Pippa Drummond, *The Provincial Music Festival in England, 1784-1914*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011.