Concert life in London from Mozart to Haydn

SIMON McVEIGH

Lecturer in Music,
Goldsmiths' College, University of London

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

and card-playing in adjoining rooms, a combination that linked a public concert still further to a society assembly. As a final bonus, concert tickets were sometimes specially engraved; those designed by Cipriani and engraved by Bartolozzi for Giardini's benefits were regarded as minor art-works.

Audience attitudes and behaviour

One consequence of incorporation into the social week was the need to follow its mores. Many indications would seem to suggest that serious attention to the music was a rarity. For one thing, concerts failed to keep track with fashionable later hours. Even as starting times moved on during the period from seven o'clock to eight, it was certainly not good form to arrive at the beginning of a concert. The Prince of Wales missed the entire first half of one of Salomon's concerts, and Fanny Burney thought nothing of having Cecilia arrive during the second half of a Pantheon concert. Haydn, seeing late-comers drifting in during the first half, requested that his new symphonies be performed after the interval. His biographer Dies implied that such late-comers were often gentlemen arriving from post-prandial port who were 'so gripped by the magic of the music that they went fast to sleep'. There is other evidence that prestigious performers were kept for the second half: at an Opera Concert in 1796 annoyance greeted an interchange of items as 'a great part of the Audience were not in time' to enjoy Giornovichi's concerto, moved to the first part.[19] Even at the gardens late hours were kept. In 1777 Horace Walpole observed that it was fashionable to arrive at Ranelagh at midnight, two hours after the music finished.[20]

It scarcely needs mentioning that a concert was an opportunity to see and to be seen, with all the inevitable consequences for ostentatious finery and social intrigue. Fanny Burney's novels make it abundantly clear that the concert-hall was a principal venue for conversation and assignations. It is rather depressing to find that even the novelist herself came to regard the concert in much the same light, to judge from a letter of 1792, which shows no trace of her former irony:

> Last Night, for the first Time, I ventured to a public place. I went to salomon's Concert, & was quite enchanted by sweet sounds, long strangers to my Ears. It was *My First Appearance in Public* for many Years. – Yet there was no particular applause upon my entrance! – For which reason, finding it so little answer, I do not purpose repeating the same abstinence for quite as long a period in haste.[21]

Both Carlisle House and the Pantheon were well-known places for young ladies to look out for a good match, while other women had less respectable aims. Having gone to the Pantheon to hear Agujari sing, Thomas Campbell was not at all surprised to see courtesans arrayed in peacock-feathers among the lords and ladies.[22]

Furthermore, fashionable audiences never sat through an entire concert in reverential silence. Burney complained that even 'the best Operas and Concerts

are accompanied with a buz and murmur of conversation'; instrumental music in particular was only rarely 'attentively regarded' in fashionable circles (John Marsh found much the same at Vauxhall in 1770).[23] In both *Evelina* and *Cecilia* Fanny Burney censured audiences at the Pantheon concerts:

> There was an exceeding good concert, but too much talking to hear it well. Indeed I am quite astonished to find how little music is attended to in silence; for though every body seems to admire, hardly any body listens.
>
> They entered the great room during the second act of the Concert, to which as no one of the party but herself had any desire to listen, no sort of attention was paid; the ladies entertaining themselves as if no Orchestra was in the room, and the gentlemen, with an equal disregard to it, struggling for a place by the fire.

Cecilia opined sarcastically that music inspired conversation: 'I think every body talks more during the performance than between the acts.' Occasionally a reviewer admonished members of the audience for their behaviour at the theatres, but only when obviously taken to excess:

> Some stupid young men in the Front Boxes were extremely troublesome during the [oratorio] performance: anxious to shew their wit, they rendered their folly conspicuous, and exposed themselves ultimately to the contempt and indignation of all around them. Talking loud, and lolling in the laps of loose women, during the performance of *Sacred* Music, is a species of indecorum that calls for the severest reprobation.[24]

It was perfectly normal for audiences to walk around during concerts. When Haydn appeared, cognoscenti crowded forward towards the front of the room; but when a minor singer like Marie Chanu was performing the audience was completely indifferent and wandered around the hall.[25] Private concerts attracted similar complaints. Attending a private rout, Cecilia could scarcely hear the concert for other ladies talking about forthcoming dances, though 'not one of them failed, from time to time, to exclaim with great rapture "*What sweet music!*"'. Even the King conversed with the company during the performance of court odes, and at the Duke of Queensberry's concerts cards 'proved a powerful rival to the music'.[26] It is hardly surprising that for serious chamber-music the Prince of Wales insisted on dedicated morning concerts without conversation.

Doubts were inevitably cast on British taste. Goldsmith in *The Citizen of the World* (1762) observed that the English nobility were 'not fond of thinking' and supported music merely to 'indulge an happy vacancy' while retaining cultural pretensions. A later writer observed, with some justification, that the English tire of 'mere Music' at a concert, requiring the extra entertainment provided by the playhouse or the pleasure garden.[27] Some even questioned whether lavish public patronage of concerts was based on any genuine feeling for music. The following is characteristic of plaints in newspapers around 1790: 'And thus we see that the incomparable talents of HAYDN meet with becoming respect from a nation, which, though smitten with the *rage* of Music, is not really musical.'[28] William Jackson was particularly scathing about

London's concert audiences and he thought their enthusiasms insincere, suggesting that the music least understood received the most applause, since no-one wished to betray a lack of refined taste.[29]

Yet it would be a mistake to write off all London audiences as philistine and unresponsive, and Fanny Burney may well have exaggerated for satirical effect. Dedicated societies seem to have maintained more decorum: the Castle Society met at seven o'clock for a two-part programme with a twenty-minute interval, and fines were levied on anyone walking around or talking aloud during the music. Whether audiences at the Concert of Ancient Music were similarly riveted it is hard to say. But this society by its very nature encouraged a lofty attitude towards the concert, focussing attention on musical values rather than on performers. The role of learned connoisseur was scarcely compatible with casual manners, especially in the presence of the King. Certainly the 1784 Commemoration was honoured with rapt attention.

Even at modern concerts certain performers and composers do seem to have inspired genuine appreciation. When Mara first appeared, for example, there was 'perfect silence', and similar anticipation greeted Haydn's new symphonies at Salomon's concerts: according to Mrs Papendiek, at the first concert of 1791 'the company rose to a person and stood through the whole of the first movement'.[30] If such courtesies were a rarity here, audiences did demonstrate their reactions with striking lack of inhibition. Songs were often encored, as were single movements of Haydn symphonies. Even at the Professional Concert, a scena sung by Mrs Billington drew 'rapturous plaudits from an audience too polished to be generally boisterous'.[31] Applause might break out during a performance at any kind of concert. At an oratorio concert in 1784, 'the audience could not suppress their feelings till the pieces were finished, but clapped at the end of every part'.[32] A report of Haydn symphony performances in 1794 defined acceptable limits to public expressions of delight:

> Passages often occur which render it impossible to listen to them without becoming excited. We are altogether carried away by admiration, and forced to applaud with hand and mouth. This is especially the case with Frenchmen, of whom we have so many here that all public places are filled with them. You know that they have great sensibility, and cannot restrain their transports, so that in the midst of the finest passages in soft adagios they clap their hands in loud applause and thus mar the effect. In every symphony of Haydn the adagio or andante is sure to be repeated each time, after the most vehement encores.[33]

Perhaps this was a relatively new phenomenon. *The Public Advertiser* on 20 March 1789 recalled the old-fashioned civility of Handel's day:

> At the conclusion of each Oratorio, the audience gave their approbation or not at their pleasure of the piece performed. Secondly, the principal singers paid their respects, and were generally honoured with approbation or not at pleasure. And immediately after Mr. Handel himself came forward and paid his respects, and never failed to receive marks of general approbation from the generous public.