

“Bawdy songs made godly”? Charles Wesley’s family and the musical life of mid-eighteenth century Bristol

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When Thomas Chatterton satirised a typical Methodist in January 1770, he claimed that he “Could sing One hundred Hymn by rote / Hymns which will sanctify the throte / But some indeed composed so oddly / Youd swear twas bawdy Songs made godly” (Chatterton, i: 446-7). At that date, Chatterton (1752-1770) was one of four child prodigies living in Bristol, the others being Hannah More (born 1745), and, of course, Charles (born 1757) and Samuel (born 1766) Wesley. All four were brought up in England’s second city, which, with about 50,000 inhabitants, was at the height of its importance. Although celebrated then (and since) largely for its economic prosperity and political weight, Bristol was also a very active cultural centre, with a whole range of artistic and literary activity aimed both at its own citizens and at the fashionable visitors to its Hotwells, a major summer rival to nearby Bath. It was also home to a diverse and dynamic religious culture. It had perhaps the strongest congregations of old dissent (Presbyterian, Baptist, and Quaker in particular) outside London, and, from 1737 onwards, it formed the western centre both of Methodism and of other branches of the wider evangelical movement (Barry 1988, 1991a, 1993a, 1997). Charles and Sarah Wesley had a home in Bristol from 1749 to 1778, and it was their main residence from 1756 to 1771, after which their son Samuel remained there until 1776 while father and son Charles were based in London (Rack 2004a, 2004b).

This chapter will try to tease out the significance of this Bristol period in the life of Charles Wesley’s family by exploring the relationship, both positive and negative, between the musical and religious cultures to which the family were exposed. It will also consider how the attitudes of the Wesleys, especially as they affected the musical education of the two boys, mirrored wider concerns in Bristol culture regarding the relationship between the secular, even “bawdy”, world of music, and the religious and moral values of the “godly”. As I have shown elsewhere (Barry 2005), the very different careers of those other child prodigies, Chatterton and More, can profitably be compared in this context, and here I hope to show that the Wesley brothers’ life in Bristol also throws light on the family’s ideals in music and religion. I hope my focus on the Bristol context will complement and deepen the accounts of the musical careers of the younger Wesleys offered recently by Gareth Lloyd and Carlton Young (Lloyd, 1998 and Young 2007).

There are two main sources for the musical education and activity of Charles the younger and Samuel in Bristol. These are Charles the elder’s account of his two sons, reproduced in the Thomas Jackson edition of his journal (1849, ii:140-155), and Samuel Wesley’s manuscript reminiscences held in the British Library (*Lbl Add. 27593*), extensively quoted by Winters and Lightwood (1937): for the latter source I will quote from Lightwood. Beyond that, there are occasional references in letters, and a few mentions in the Bristol newspapers, although the infrequency of these demonstrates the extent to which Charles the elder was fulfilling his policy of keeping his sons (and indeed himself) out of the public eye. Occasionally visitors to the house give us an insight, however. On 5 November 1761 the Bristol accountant and Wesleyan follower, William Dyer, noted in his diary (as summarised by him later): “Visited Charles Wesley and heard wife play and sing hymn tunes on the spinet – she being noted for singing and for music. One of the children, a child in petticoats, a kind of prodigy for music being able to play a tune on the spinet without having learned the

notes, but would hit upon a tune merely by a surprising genius for music” (*BRCl* 20095: 5 Nov. 1761). This brief comment encapsulates several key themes that emerge from the longer accounts by Charles the elder and Samuel. Apart from the emphasis on Charles the younger’s talent, not only prodigious but also natural rather than learned, we find the stress on his mother’s own musical skills and influence and, of course, the centrality of hymns to the domestic music-making.

The importance of Sarah’s influence is emphasised in all the accounts. She had received a good education in music and singing in Brecknockshire as part of the gentry family of Marmaduke Gwynne. When he was converted to Methodism by Howell Harris, he clearly became a patron of Methodist music. For example, Edward Godwin’s *Hymns*, printed at Bristol in 1747, was dedicated by Godwin to “Marmaduke Gwyn Esq.,” as a patron who was very fond of hymns. Charles the elder’s account described the two-year old Charles junior playing tunes based on what his mother sang (or what he heard in the streets), and how she used to play the harpsichord to him, before tying him to a chair so he could also play (ii: 140). Samuel noted that his mother had very considerable vocal talent, played prettily on the harpsichord and sang sweetly, especially Handel’s oratorios. He claimed that his father considered that his sons had music by their mother’s side (Lightwood 1937: 14-15). It is perfectly reasonable, of course, to take this statement at face value, but one may wonder whether it also reflects a certain distancing of Charles the elder from his sons’ musical skills, both in terms of gender and also perhaps in terms of religious significance. Or, put more positively perhaps, it was well within the proper sphere of a mother, especially such a devout and devoted mother as Sarah, to educate her sons to a love for, and skill in, music, which ideally would reflect her own subordination of that musical skill to the interests of both family and religion.

The stress on Sarah’s influence also has to be understood in the context of the boys’ natural precocity, and the extent and nature of their formal musical education. This theme dominates Charles the elder’s account of the boys’ music-making. As we have seen, when under three Charles the younger was said to play a tune readily and in just time and with true bass “without study or hesitation” (ii: 140). His talent was identified by the Bristol organist Edmund Broderip (not John Broderip as assumed by Lloyd [2004: 181]), who “heard him in petticoats and foretold he would one day make a great player” as he played “*con spirito*”, but he was “left to ramble on” until nearly six. Even then, when given a music master, they chose an obscure organist called Edmund Rooke, “a man of no name but very good-natured who let him run on *ad libitum*, while he sat by more to observe than to control him”. This was despite the fact that another Bristol organist, Nelme Rogers, “the oldest organist in Bristol” was his “first and very great friend”, often setting him upon his knee and making him play to him, “declaring he was more delighted to hear him than any of his scholars or himself” (ii: 141).

The reason Charles the elder then gives for not providing his first son with a better formal education is how costly it would have been to get him “the first masters” or purchase the necessary music. This was probably a factor, since music teachers were certainly expensive, and the Wesley family not wealthy. But there also seems to be a note of pride in Charles’s statement that, without hope of a benefactor to provide support, his son went on “with the assistance of nature” until ten. “Then Mr Rogers told me it was high time to put him in trammels”, so Charles the younger was sent first to Mr. Granville at Bath and then to various “London masters”, until he returned to Bristol in March 1770. Then, Charles the elder is at pains to tell us, he asked Joseph

Kelway whether “he should not have Mr Br--- [Broderip] to my son. He answered ‘no, he can learn nothing from B., tho B. may from him’” (ii: 142-9).

A similar theme, though less fully articulated, is found in his account of his younger son’s early talent. Samuel was playing tunes when two years 11 months old, mostly picked up from the street organs. While his brother was playing he used to stand by “with his childish fiddle scraping and beating time”. He taught himself to read and write at four to five years old from various oratorios, and composed a great deal of music of his own for oratorios before he was six. Although Broderip apparently also took a great interest in him, he then learned to play by note between six and seven from “Mr. Williams a young organist of Bristol”, but during his year under Mr. Williams it was hard to say “which is the master and which the scholar”, as he chose what music he learnt and often played extempore. He also taught himself the violin, admittedly assisted by a soldier for six weeks, before he had twenty lessons from the professional violinist Mr. Kingsbury. (ii: 152–5; Lightwood 1937: 20–21.)

Why this family reluctance, both to make use of professional musicians and to acknowledge that they might have done much to assist the early flowering of the two boys? No doubt family pride and the narrative power of natural genius played a major part, just as the problems of finance were certainly real. But was there also a family decision to choose lesser masters who lacked the influence, or perhaps the capability, to educate the boys in musical directions which might have challenged the family’s ideals and values? An interesting parallel is offered by the remark of the Moravian minister in Bristol in his diary on 23 December 1766, commenting on how one of the children, Sammy Fripp, son of a wealthy tobacco cutter of the same name, “lately began to learn on the harpsichord by his father’s desire from a worldly master one Mr Combe [sic, see below on Coombes] – surprising what dangers this exposes him to” (*BRu*: Diary of Single Brethren, 1766).

If we consider again the various Bristol masters who are named, an interesting pattern emerges. (The information about them and other matters in the ensuing paragraphs was unless otherwise stated found in the *Bristol Journal*, *Bonner and Middleton’s Bristol Journal*, *Bristol Weekly Intelligencer*, *Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, Hooper, and the Bristol Record Office sources listed in the Bibliography.) Edmund Broderip, a leading member of the west country musical dynasty of Broderips, had been educated (at the expense of Lady Betty Germain) by Geminiani and Kelway. His Bristol friend John Malchair claimed that “no one but his master Kelway could touch Scarlatti like him. [The Londoners heard him with admiration”. (Hooper: 113, 160; Bodleian MS Mus d. 32; Lyman, wrongly claiming Edmund taught the Wesley brothers.) Although he never advertised his teaching services in the newspapers, he taught harpsichord and singing to the young Mary Robinson, later the Prince of Wales’s mistress “Perdita” (M. Robinson: 14-15), and in 1770 was involved in a dispute with a former pupil who claimed to have been taught by him for six years and to have been appointed by Broderip as his deputy to teach in three ladies’ boarding schools in the previous two years. Broderip was not only organist of several of the parish churches (St. James, Temple and the Mayor’s Chapel), but also performed regularly at concerts and balls in various venues and was the first organist at the Assembly Rooms, opened in 1756 on Prince’s Street, for which he supplied the organ. He represented not just the most expensive and fashionable face of Bristol music, but also the closest alliance between the religious foundation of music-making (his church positions) and the secular world of fashion. These came together, for example, in the regular concerts held for the Sons of the Clergy “feasts” (in aid of the

families of Anglican clergy), Bristol's equivalent of the Three Choirs Festival, which Broderip often organised.

The tensions between these two worlds could be expressed in many ways. For example, organists were accused of neglecting their church duties for more lucrative work: in 1771 the Temple vestry rebuked Broderip for not attending as often as he ought and for sending inferior deputies. There was also criticism of the style of their playing. Although Chatterton published one poem praising Broderip's "excellent performance on the organ" (i: 168), in several other poems he attacked his playing, and in a letter of January 1770 he contrasted Broderip unfavourably with John Allen (a regular organist at his beloved St Mary Redcliffe), claiming the former lacked real taste, indulging instead in over-ornamentation, tickling the fancy or providing empty amusement by offering airs "stolen from Italian operas" (i: 425, 516-17, 640). It is certainly clear that Broderip was very effective at maximising his own reputation through ensuring a high profile in both religious and secular events, and that he shared his musical skills and repertoire across both worlds. So, even though Broderip was a pillar of both the church and musical establishment in Bristol, his very public and self-aggrandising career management may have appeared to the Wesleys to offer precisely the model for their sons which they wished to avoid.

By contrast, as Charles the elder stressed, Edward Rooke was a man of little reputation. Although temporary organist of the cathedral in 1756, and organist of All Saints from 1759 and then of the cathedral from 1769 until his death in 1773, he appears little in the newspapers or musical press, although benefit concerts were held for him both at the Assembly Rooms and at Cooper's Hall (another ballroom and concert venue). He was a singer as well as an organist, singing in the cathedral choir from 1759 to 1762 as well as at his benefit concerts. According to an advertisement in 1759 he offered home lessons on the harpsichord, and two years after his death an auction included "all his harpsichords and spinets".

Even greater obscurity surrounds David Williams, the chosen master for Samuel. Samuel's own reminiscences confirm that he was his only master on the harpsichord and "taught me with great attention for some years". He acknowledges his "justness and precision" but also echoes his father's account in claiming that Williams allowed him to choose his own music (Lightwood 1937: 20). Williams succeeded Rooke as organist of All Saints in 1772, although he had presumably been in Bristol since at least 1767, when he was married at St James church, and in 1768 he obtained the freedom of the city (allowing him to vote) as the husband of a cordwainer's daughter. It is tempting to suppose that she may have been the "Mary Williams organist" living in St James churchyard who appears on the Wesleyan membership list for Bristol in 1783, which may imply that David was chosen by the Wesleys as a co-religionist. The same list also includes a "Grace Rooke" in James Street, who might be a widow or daughter of Edward Rooke, so religion may have affected both choices (Kent: 123, 121), assuring the Wesleys that these particular organists were less likely to corrupt their sons.

If family trust was the key factor, it is less clear how it excluded the choice of Nelme Rogers. Why, if he was Charles junior's "best friend", was he not asked to teach him? Maybe it was a matter of age. He was indeed Bristol's oldest organist, having first held a church post at All Saints in 1715, and also serving St James, Christchurch and in particular St Mary Redcliffe, where he was organist from the time the new organ was built (in 1727) until his resignation in 1772 (although John Allen must have often deputised for him there prior to his appointment in 1772). However, for about twenty years until the late 1740s Rogers had also taught dancing at a

dancing school in the Guildhall and to private families, so he may also have seemed too much part of the world of fashion.

It is worth adding that there were plenty of other organists in Bristol during this period from whom teachers could have been chosen. Rooke was preceded as cathedral organist by Edward Higgins and George Coombes. Higgins, who came to Bristol in 1759 from Salisbury and was also a vicar-choral in Dublin, quit his cathedral post in 1765 but remained in Bristol, dying in King's Square in 1769. He was also a singer, performing in *Acis and Galatea* at the Assembly Rooms in 1765. In 1759 he advertised that he instructed gentlemen and ladies in music on the harpsichord, violin, violoncello and guitar, as well as singing, for the usual price of £6 6s per annum if waited on, or £4 4s in the boarding schools. Presumably these prices were too high for the Wesleys, or else Higgins's active involvement in the concert life of the city put them off.

George Coombes (variously spelt Combe, Combes and Coombes in the sources), the "wordly master" of Sammy Fripp in 1766, had two periods as Cathedral organist (1756-9 and 1765-9), having come to Bristol from Wimborne in Dorset, and was also All Saints organist 1756-8. Like all the cathedral organists, he was expected to instruct the choristers, but he was also paid for two years as a "singing man", i.e. adult member of the cathedral choir. In 1757 he advertised that he taught young ladies on the harpsichord and learners on the guitar, and would attend ladies in the countryside, and he was involved in a dispute in 1767 with a singing man he had instructed.

Reference has already been made to John Allen, organist and "music-master" (his occupation when freed as a joiner's son in 1774), "nicknamed 'Thumbs' as playing upon the great organ [of St Mary Redcliffe] had changed all his fingers"[Bristol Infirmary Biographical Memoirs, vol 1 fo. 54], who is mentioned by Samuel in a letter of 1773 as calling at their house (Lightwood, 1937: 21). William Bayton, Broderip's former pupil, was active in concerts and as a composer of secular music and songs from about 1770, but never obtained a church living, which may help explain why he appears in the 1775 trade directory as "nurse, organist"! (Sketchley: 6.) Finally, Rice Wasborough, freed as a barber-surgeon's son in 1774, began playing at St Augustine and at St Peter in 1771-2 and was being favourably compared with Broderip in 1773, before eventually becoming cathedral organist in 1781.

The prominence of the church organists in the public musical life of Bristol reflects the success with which the Anglican Church, through investment in organs and architectural improvements, had succeeded in establishing its place in the polite culture of the period (Barry 1993a: 202-4). This may, in turn, have ensured the relative stagnation of the nonconformist churches in the decades after 1720, by attracting the polite classes back into church: a report of the opening of the new organ at St Peter in 1772 commented on the presence of many nonconformists, even Quakers, in the packed church, confirmed by a poem on the same event.

But this alliance of religion and fashion had its own problems. The music of organs and elaborate chanting and intoning in the cathedral tradition was distrusted by many as a popish element, compared to the simple metrical psalms and hymn-singing of parish churches. Defenders of complex music, such as Arthur Bedford (vicar of Temple in the early eighteenth century), had first of all to establish the scriptural warranty for the music they favoured. As we have already seen, there could be tensions between the demands of church work and secular activity leading to questions about how far the true interests of religion became sacrificed to commercial demands and secular values: these issues were highlighted by Bedford and remained

sensitive (Barry 1993: 201, 204-6). But there was also the issue of whether this particular form of music met the needs of the whole congregation or the full range of church activity. Was fashionable organ music, while attracting a polite congregation, perhaps preventing the churches from reaching ordinary people, or from meeting the demand for a more intense and participatory religious experience?

Significantly, this question became focused on the issue of singing. Despite the building of organs, the Anglican churches (and their rivals in old dissent) had retained the traditional method of congregational singing (with the parish clerk giving out the line) and generally the old tunes. It was widely recognised that a major attraction in the new evangelical revival, deployed not just by the Methodists but also Baptist and other Calvinist evangelicals, were the new forms of hymn- and psalm-singing. These involved the congregation (or smaller bands or societies, for whom more complex music was impractical) far more intensely and utilised lively tunes often borrowed from secular ballads or operas: Chatterton's "bawdy songs made godly".

Chapters 1 and 5 consider the impact of this development within the Methodist movement and the place of the Wesleys within it. Suffice it to note here that numerous Methodist hymn books were published in Bristol by Wesley's printers, first two of the Farley family (Felix and his widow Elizabeth) and then William Pine. (Barry 1991b, 1993b). Charles' and John's publishing, in which their hymns were central, lay at the heart of their income. John had used the value and profits of his books to persuade the Gwynnes to allow Sarah to marry Charles, and it was the profit from one of his hymn publications that allowed Charles to buy his Bristol house (J. Wesley 1975, xxvi: 347; C. Wesley 1849, i: 46).

In addition to the Wesleys, Methodist authors included Edward Godwin, Joseph Humphreys, John Thomas and William Williams (the last two aiming at the Welsh market). In 1756 Robert Williamson published another collection in Bristol under Moravian auspices. The Bristol Moravians purchased an organ in 1756 and in early 1757 began to buy children's hymnbooks, before in 1769 desiring all their "brothers and sisters" that, when the new hymnbooks arrived, they "never come to chapel without them so that they may join in the singing without the brother's giving out the line" (*BRru* Moravian Collection, Committee Minutes: 20 August 1756, and 9 Jan. 1757 30 July 1769). George Whitefield's Tabernacle chapel in Bristol also regularly bought hymnbooks from 1767 onwards, ordering 25 at a cost of £2 10s in 1775, and in 1774 they appointed John Price as a singing master "to teach the singers" at £4 *per annum*.

However central it was to Bristol Methodism, the development of hymn-singing had a much wider impact on churches of all kinds, which responded vigorously to the Methodist challenge. The most active group in exploiting the potential of the hymn were the Baptists. Hymn-singing was a well-established tradition among Bristol Baptists by the early eighteenth century, but it was greatly encouraged by the emphasis on congregational hymn-singing of their dynamic minister Benjamin Foskett, who started an academy in Bristol (later called the Baptist Education Society, and forerunner of Bristol Baptist College), whose pupils included Benjamin Beddome (Hayden: 28-9, 35-6, 152, 231, 269-97; Sharpe). Among its clergy and teachers were a number who composed hymns, including John Beddome (father of Benjamin), John Needham, and Caleb Evans, who published one of **their** earliest hymn collections in 1769 in collaboration with his former pupil John Ash.

But its influence spread far beyond such evangelical leaders. Many lay people were also drawn to hymn-writing: a considerable number of the poems published in

the newspapers were called hymns, and devout young Christians such as Mary Stokes (later Dudley) wrote hymns on their spiritual condition (Chatterton i: 4; Dudley: 7-8) Many of the music collections advertised for sale by Bristol booksellers were psalm and hymn settings, and these were presumably played by the devout when making music at home on Sundays (e.g. Butterworth: 4-5). Hymns were printed for a meeting at the city workhouse in 1767 and Christmas Day 1770 was celebrated in several parishes with hymns sung from specially printed sheets (*Hymns Sung; Hymns for Christmas Day*).

As Temperley has shown, the revived interest in congregational singing at this period was reflected not just in hymns, but also in new emphasis on the singing of psalms, which were acceptable to many Anglicans and Presbyterians who were dubious about hymns. In 1769 Edmund Broderip's brother John, organist at Wells, published his *Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*, sold at five shillings to advance subscribers and six shillings to the public. By the 1770s many of the parish churches were buying new versions of the psalms for congregational use. In the *Bristol Journal* of 7 March 1772 the Bristol music-seller Naish advertised the volume *Divine Music*, costing 1s 6d and printed in London, containing twenty psalm tunes in three parts adapted to be sung to the new version of the Psalms at Bristol Cathedral and "most places of public worship in Bristol", composed by the late Cathedral organist Coombes and others. Intriguingly, the British Library copy of this volume belonged to Samuel Wesley, and it includes some keyboard fingering and organ registration added by him. In a letter of 1773 the seven-year old Samuel reports that "last Sunday I played a psalm at St James' church" (Lightwood, 1937, 21), perhaps using this book? Later eighteenth-century Bristol organists produced similar publications, and Hooper has noted the popularity of metrical psalmody during this particular period (271-80).

The fullest account of this change comes in the records of the Lewin's Mead Presbyterian congregation, which at this point contained many of the leading merchant families. In 1758 they proposed "to introduce a better manner of singing psalms in public worship". The ministers were to preach suitable sermons to recommend the people to "this delightful act of worship in singing forth the praise of God" and "making melody not only in their hearts but with their voices", especially asking the females to join "in a concert so divine". The aim was to be achieved partly by paying the clerk to instruct *gratis* any young people or others who wished to learn to sing (initially £10 *per annum*, reduced to £7 in 1762), and partly by abandoning singing by line in favour of singing from books. In order to achieve this the church had to purchase enough books for all the poor (150 books at a cost of £13), while expecting the prosperous to buy and bring their own. Even this assumed that all the congregation could read, and reluctantly the church made the concession to illiteracy of singing each hymn or psalm twice, once before the sermon according to the old method, and once after by the book.

The final theme that runs through the family narratives is the significance of a particular brand of music, epitomised by the figure of Handel and his oratorios. Charles the elder noted that any master they chose for Charles the younger had to be an admirer of Handel, "as my son preferred him to all the world". His two favourite authors before he was ten were Handel and Corelli, and the choice of Granville of Bath was because he was "an old friend of Handels". During the next four years in Bath and London his influences were "Handel, Corelli, Scarlatti and Geminiani" and

he had a “particular bent to church musick, especially oratorios” (ii: 142-4). There are only two recorded instances of Charles playing in public in Bristol. One was a harpsichord concerto at a benefit concert for a violinist (Mr Morgan) in 1769 at the Assembly Room (presumably the performance for which his father was reprimanded by two Bristolians in 1769 (Lloyd, 1998, 27) , but the other was *Messiah* in the Cathedral in 1774, at which Master Charles Wesley played a concerto on the organ between the acts (*Bristol Journal*, 28 January 1769, 12 March 1774; Lightwood 1937: 4). There were only two Bristol subscribers to a series of Handel oratorio publications in the early 1770s (*Jephtha* in 1770, *Israel in Egypt* in 1771, *Saul*, *Joshua* and *Judas Maccabeus* in 1773): one was “Charles Wesley junior”, the other Henry Burgum (on whom see below) . Samuel taught himself to read words from the oratorio of *Samson* and by five “had all of *Samson* and *Messiah* by heart”. As already noted, he remembered his mother singing Handel’s oratorios. In the 1773 letter he reports: “I have learnt Handel’s water piece today and some of the Highland Laddie” (Lightwood, 1937: 21). In a satirical poem of 1776 (see below) he observed: “I question if their worships know, the Odds twixt me and Handel” (Lightwood, 1937: 38-9).

It would seem clear that for the Wesley family Handel’s music in general, and his oratorios in particular, provided the ideal blend of musical excellence with religious edification, allowing full engagement of both voices and instruments. Interestingly, in this respect at least, their preferences are closely matched in the public world of Bristol music. For all those seeking to reconcile the worlds of church music and public concert-making, Handel’s oratorios became the perfect compromise. Anthems and oratorios by Purcell, Handel and Boyce (whose *Solomon* was performed at the Assembly Room on 17 December 1759) were used in musical concerts, and even on the stage, as well as in church performances (Hooper, *passim*). It was noted of Broderip that “he extracted organ parts from the most famous choruses of Handel and played them in a most masterly style” (*Ob Mus* d.32). Handel’s *Messiah* was performed at the opening of the new Assembly Room in 1756, and *Judas Maccabeus* the next year when the new organ (Broderip’s) was unveiled, and in 1763 Broderip conducted another *Messiah* at the Assembly Rooms (Dean: 472-3; Collins: 44-6; newspaper sources).

A newspaper article by “Philalethes”, prompted by the 1756 opening, welcomed the proper use of music for its first purpose of religion, although noting that it was “often prostituted to wicked and wanton purposes”. He suggested that it become “an established rule” for there to be a performance of “so solemn a piece of sacred musick” at each “high festival of the church”, but feared that such religious purposes would be neglected and the new assembly room used only for entertainment and diversion. Its organisers should ensure it was constantly used for religious piety, “not just consecrate it with a sublime piece of musick and afterwards banish it from the place”. Music, like that of David or the new Jerusalem, could not only take away the cares of the world, but also mend hearts and instruct in religious truths. Those who prevented this and would “rather pervert it by confining it solely to the more fashionable use of love and gallantry, solely to humour the deprived taste of the age, will banish from their Assembly many who would gladly join in any instructive or innocent entertainment”. The following week a further correspondent, “Laicus”, not only praised the excellent performance, elegance of the room and conduct of the occasion, but also the “serious disposition” of the audience “as such a solemn occasion giving glory to our God requires, that the whole assembly rising from their seats seemed with their whole hearts to join in the heavenly song”. But in this case

also there was a warning tone in the final statement that “I think we may be well assured no light and wanton strains, no French or Italian soft airs, will ever afford such solid, rational delight, such secret joy and satisfaction, as every well-disposed heart must certainly have felt in a very sensible manner on this occasion.” (*Felix Farley’s Bristol Journal*, 10, 17 January 1756).

According to Dean (45), the only performance of Handel’s *Messiah* given in a sacred building in his lifetime was that at Bristol cathedral in 1758, and, as we have seen, another was given in Easter 1774, supported by Charles the younger. A printed list of the music for that performance survives (*BRro*, Bristol Infirmary Biographical Memoirs, iii: 61). There are no records of similar performances in Bristol’s parish churches in this period, though the neighbouring church of Keynsham (home of the Brydges family, friends of Handel) was used for this purpose several times after 1750, with Bristol musicians playing a major part (Johnstone 2008: 118, and newspaper sources). Handel’s oratorios were used both at the musical “feasts” of the Sons of the Clergy and at the opening of the new chapel run by Lady Huntingdon’s connection in Bristol. Both John Wesley and William Dyer were impressed at the effect of the 1758 oratorio on the crowded audiences at the cathedral. This was the only musical event that Dyer records attending and he noted that “a great multitude assembled to see and hear this great performance of sacred music, sung by men and women of unhallowed lips”. (J. Wesley 1975–, xxi: 161; *BRcl* 20095: 17 August 1758.)

Yet, as Dyer’s rather equivocal tone signifies, even Handel performances stood uneasily between the hallowed and the unhallowed. The 1774 performance at the cathedral degenerated into violence as people competed for seats: in Dyer’s words “a riot took place, and many of the ladies lost their caps, muffles etc.” (31 March 1774). In the newspaper controversy that followed about who was responsible for the disturbances, blame for poor organisation was widely placed on Henry Burgum, the Handel-worshipping pewterer. He is now best known as one of Chatterton’s patrons, for whom Chatterton constructed a false pedigree, but at the time he was notorious in Bristol for his attempts to run a series of musical events and other charitable occasions, which led eventually to his bankruptcy through neglect of his business. To his numerous critics this was only to be expected since, as one of the critics of the 1774 riot put it, Burgum might “cut a worthy figure among his brother tradesmen, but should learn not to go beyond his last” (Meyerstein: 136, 149-50; *Bristol Journal*, 2 and 9 April 1774). A series of rival subscription concerts were dogged by mutual accusations that those running them were not genteel or knowledgeable enough to organise such matters (Barry 1985a: 194-5, and newspaper sources). The public world of the concert was inevitably part of that hierarchical world of wealth, education and fashion from which both John and Charles Wesley felt generally alienated and from which they sought to protect Charles’s children. By limiting their musical education, and following the ideal domestic combination of hymns and Handel offered by Sarah the Wesley family sought the best possible reconciliation between music and religion.

There remains the question, of course, of how far the two boys shared the concerns of their family. Were they content to be kept away from the public **life** of Bristol music and develop their music in the protected **setting** of their house? Here we may note again the occasional hints of another **world** of “**street**” music influencing the boys, with the two-year old Charles picking up tunes heard in the **street**, and Samuel at the same age picking up tunes mostly “from the **street**-organs” (C. Wesley 1849, ii: 140, 152). This reminds us that Bristol’s musical soundscape included work- and drinking-**based** music, **built** on the simpler music of fiddles and drums, accompanying the maritime and industrial trades of the city or filling the taverns and clubs, which

enjoyed vigorous traditions of toasting and harmony-singing. There was also a world of civic culture, with regular processions and civic events accompanied by music, notably that provided by the wind and string instruments of the city waits (Barry 1985a: 221-8).

We also have several versions of a “serio-comic epistle in verse” supposedly written by Samuel (though also copied down by his father), recording his disappointment at being initially invited to perform publicly in Bristol and then being turned down, on grounds of age. One version of this clearly refers to the 1774 Cathedral concert described above, suggesting that Charles’ organ concerto replaced a planned performance by Samuel. The other, apparently a couple of years later, states that it was “on being advertised, as a child, to play before the worshipful the mayor and Corporation at a city feast and afterwards declined”. In both versions, Samuel complains playfully about being treated as a child:, noting (ironically) his evident lack of the “solidness” or “judgment” of Henry Burgum, or the “steadiness” or “gravity” of another of the organisers, Thomas Lediard (“Liddy”, to rhyme with giddy).

Excusing their contempt they say
(Which more inflames my passion),
I am not grave enough to play
Before the Corporation.

To those sweet city waits, although
I may not hold a candle
I question if their worships know
The odds twixt me and Handel.

Interestingly, in one version he also compares himself to the organists.

With Bristol-Organists not yet
I come in competition
But let them know I wou’d be great
I do not want ambition

Recording his high-spirited resentment of his ‘rash despisers’, he threatens revenge unless compensated with an (expensive) Stainer violin:

Nothing shall, sir, appease my rage
At their uncouth demeanor
Unless they prudently assuage
Mine anger with - A Steyner. (Baker, Representative Verse, pp. 324-6,
no, 289)

Judging by the poem’s strong (if playful) sense of personal worth, even “ambition”, to be judged superior to the limited talents of the musical amateurs of Bristol, it is tempting to think that, for all his parents’ efforts, Samuel Wesley shared more in common with fellow prodigy Thomas Chatterton than with the latter’s stereotypical Methodist!

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