

# John Abraham Fisher's *A Comparative View of the English, French and Italian Schools: A British musician tours Europe*

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During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, travel in Europe passed from the ranks of the adventurer and explorer to that of the ordinary person. In particular, travel to continental Europe became popular with the British. Both the speed at which travel could be undertaken and the relative safety of such travel had improved to the point that, by the end of the eighteenth century, entire families could travel from Britain to parts of the continent without undue fear. For some, such visits abroad were voyages of discovery; for others, they were the means by which to give children an education that would be impossible or too expensive to obtain back at home.<sup>1</sup>

It would be unwise, however, to consider such travel as mirroring our modern luxury holidays. Certainly, by comparison with the standards of today, the amenities were few and the hardships remained trying. Even as late as the 1770s, the trials of continental travel were very real. In 1770, Charles Burney made a tour of Europe, hoping to collect materials for a projected general history of music. In 1771, he published an interim work, *The Present State of Music in France and Italy*, which gives the reader a vivid picture of the vicissitudes of some of the inns at which coaches stopped, complete with anterooms which appeared like pig sties, and bedrooms that were infested with bugs and vermin. Thieves and highwaymen were always a present threat.

Despite such inconveniences, the British continued to travel, and to write of their experiences. In 1935, Edward Cox published an annotated bibliography of such travelogues published in Britain prior to 1801.<sup>2</sup> His list runs to 401 pages. Obviously, the British felt obliged not only to travel, but also to record their experiences while doing so. The result was both a record of foreign travel, and in the cases of authors such as Boswell and Dafoe, literature of considerable importance. Such literature proved to be informative and educational for those who were either not inclined to travel or who, for various reasons, could not leave Britain.

This interest in matters European also extended into the realm of music, and there was much interest in Britain in foreign musical styles and performance practices. In part, this can be attributed to the presence of many foreign musicians who were actively working in England, particularly in London. In 1764, the most important concert series in London was begun by two Germans, Carl Friedrich Abel (1732-87) and Johann Christian Bach (1735-82).<sup>3</sup> The London musical establishments provided employment for both German and Italian composers and virtuosi.<sup>4</sup> In particular, many of the Italian musicians achieved fame and fortune in the opera houses. Although attacked in some quarters, Italian opera still domi-

nated the stage of the King's Theatre in London, where up to a dozen such works were presented each season during the 1780s.<sup>5</sup> The libretti of Metastasio were still venerated in England, and his works figured prominently in the repertoire of the King's Theatre, declining in popularity only at the very end of the century (Petty, 1980, p. 75). Thus, it should come as no surprise that Charles Burney's publications from the 1770s dealing with the musical life of the continent similarly achieved such success. They brought the British reader closer to the various musical styles and performing practices from abroad that the musical cognoscenti of London loved to emulate.

It was in this artistic and literary milieu that John Abraham Fisher (1744-1806) brought forth his *A Comparative View of the English, French and Italian Schools, Consisting of Airs and Gleees . . . Compos'd as Examples of their several manners, during residence in those Countries*. This compilation of vocal music was published around 1790 in Edinburgh by Corri and Sutherland.<sup>6</sup> Fisher was a prolific composer whose output includes theatre music, chamber music, symphonic works, and a wide variety of vocal music. He became attached to the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in 1767 where, in addition to composing incidental music, he was orchestral leader during the period of 1768-78.<sup>7</sup> In addition, Fisher led the Vauxhall Gardens' orchestra in the period of 1769-1773. He undertook long concert tours of the Continent after 1780, and settled in Dublin after 1786. Although only forty-six years of age in 1790, Fisher's star was beginning to decline, and he was largely forgotten in the musical circles in London. One of the results of his European tours would appear to be the collection of songs composed in the various national styles which is under present discussion.

Fisher's "travel" songs are dedicated to the Duchess of Leinster, without whose patronage the work "would have remained forever in oblivion," to cite the work's preface. To continue the travel metaphor, the collection is arranged from the perspective of a traveller who examines his/her musical surroundings before leaving for the continent, and then re-examines them upon return. As a result, the collection consists of twelve works; three songs from the Irish-English tradition, three songs in Italian, three songs in French, and three gleees (each in three voices) to English texts. The contents of the collection follows:

- p. 2. *Vurneen Deelish, Vaal ma chree - An Irish Sonnet*, translated by Edward Nolan, Esq.
- p. 5. *My Time, O Ye Muses was happily spent*
- p. 8. *The Lap Dogs Address to His Mistress*
- p. 11. *La Libertà - a Nice - canzonetta*
- p. 14. *Palinodia - a Nice - canzonetta*
- p. 17. *La Partenza - a Nice*
- p. 20. *Air François* ["Nous somme nès pour l'Esclavagè"]
- p. 23. *Parolles de Monsieur Monvelle* ["Comme une Vapeur mensongère"]
- p. 26. *Air François* ["A laisser moi retournez au village"]
- p. 29. *Glee for 3 Voices* ["Beneath this Stone lies Cath'rine Gray"]
- p. 32. *Serious Glee for 3 Voices* ["In yonder Grot the winding Valleys Pride"]
- p. 34. *Anacreontic Glee for 3 Voices* ["Wellcome the joys we cheaply buy"]

Each solo song in the collection is given with an unspecified obligato melody line, in addition to the texted melody line and a figured bass.<sup>8</sup> The

publication of songs with a figured bass accompaniment had long been a publisher's expediency, although the practice was soon to go out of fashion. Not only did it conserve paper and allow for cheaper publication of such song materials, amateur keyboard players could invent an accompaniment that was suited to their own abilities, as long as they could read the figures.<sup>9</sup> Although no instrument is specified for the obbligato part, it would seem certain that Fisher composed it with the violin in mind. In addition to making use of double stops and other distinctive violin figuration, the part exploits the lower register of the instrument, a range that exceeds those of the treble woodwinds. Given that Fisher, himself, was a violinist of distinction may account for the frequent extended introductions and postludes that feature the solo instrument. This makes several of the works in the collection true ensemble pieces, and not merely accompanied songs.

The first three songs are representative of the Irish-English tradition. Here, a distinctive British-Isles quality is found in the choice of poetry itself. The first song, *Vurdeen Deelish, Vaal ma chree*, is an Irish sonnet which is set in an English translation by Edward Nolan. The second song, *My Time, o ye Muses was happily spent*, contains references to the standard pastoral figures of Colin the shepherd who has been deserted by his lover, Phoebe. The third song, *The Lap Dog's Address to his Mistress*, evokes a domestic image in which a young lady's dog expresses his devotion to his mistress while, at the same time, quoting the wisdom of Pope and Homer. The song is set strophically, with three verses. In the final verse of the song, the dog offers advice on matters of the heart, and even suggests a suitable mate for his mistress.

If too cold for love, you will Damon esteem,  
 Tho' hope is forbid, yet contented he'll seem.  
 To copy your virtues, the pride of his life;  
 And gain in the friend, what he wished in his wife.  
 But if your fond heart, is to wedlock inclined,  
 A heart full as fond is your Damon you'll find.  
 Reward but his passion, he'll study to please,  
 And lasting endearments, will crown all your days.

These three songs stem from a tradition of English popular music with which Fisher was well familiar. Fisher had been acclaimed for his songs and cantatas that were performed in the pleasure gardens of Marylebone and Vauxhall. Such was Fisher's success in this area that four volumes of such works were published in England by 1775. Typical of this genre are the flowing melodies with uncomplicated rhythms that Fisher utilizes in these pieces. In *The Lap Dog's Address to his Mistress*, the text setting is largely syllabic, and the vocal range is only that of a ninth. The implied harmonies are kept quite simple, with few chromatically-altered chords or even seventh chords being indicated in the figured bass. Such works were meant to appeal to amateur performers, and they differ both in their style and in their vocal demands from the music which follows in the collection.

The first stop on Fisher's continental musical tour is the city of Nice, in Italy. The three songs set to Italian texts are called *La Libertà a Nice*, *Palinodia* and *La Partenza a Nice*. All are multiple-verse songs which are set strophically.<sup>10</sup> The tessitura of these songs is higher than in the English songs, and the Italian settings

require greater vocal agility. Aspects of this can be seen in *La Libertà*, where the vocal part contains numerous leaps, and there are six trills to be found in mm. 18-19. The demand for vocal agility is even more apparent in *Pàlinodia* which contains elaborate coloratura passages that take the singer up to the note, high B. *La Partenza*, with its range of only an octave, is initially less difficult, but the final coloratura flourish which ends the song requires a far more developed vocal technique than is required in the songs to English texts in the collection. (See Music Example No. 1.)

Music Example No. 1. J.A. Fisher, *La Partenza*, mm. 32-39.

For these songs, Fisher's models would appear to be drawn, in part, from Italian *opera seria*, which placed great demands on the singer in terms of flexibility, range and breath support. At the same time, there is a purely lyrical element in this music which is reminiscent of the emerging Italian comic operas of the mid-century, such as Piccinni's *La Buona Figliuola* (1760) and Sacchini's *La Contadina in Corte* (1766).<sup>11</sup> Compared to the English settings in the collection, it would seem likely that these Italian songs would have severely tested many amateur singers.

Leaving Italy, Fisher then turns his musical attention to France. Unlike the other songs in the collection, the songs to French texts do not bear specific titles. The first and third songs are simply referred to as *Air François* and the second song is described as having a text by M. de Monville. This is the only time in the songs composed to foreign texts that Fisher acknowledges the source of his poetry. All three texts are based upon pastoral love themes, and his settings have an air of melancholy that was in fashion at the time. It would appear that Fisher's knowledge of the French language, however, was not strong, and instances of awkward declamation can be found. This is most noticeable in the first song, *Nous sommes nés pour l'esclavage*, where Fisher finds it difficult to set his text appropriately within the prevailing 6/8 metre. Unlike the Italian songs, all of the French song settings are through composed. The songs are further contrasted from the Italian examples on several levels, thus demonstrating Fisher's concepts of what constituted the French musical style.

All three of the songs to French texts contain much stepwise movement in the vocal melodies, and generally avoid difficult melodic leaps. The vocal range in each is narrow, and none exceeds that of a ninth, or rises higher than the treble F#. The texts are largely set in a syllabic fashion, with no emphasis on vocal virtuosity or ornamentation. Neither the range, tessitura, nor the level of difficulty in the vocal writing would prevent amateur singers from achieving a modicum of success in these pieces. Music Example No. 2, the opening of *À laisser moi retournez*, is typical of the level of difficulty to be found.

À lais-ser moi re - tour - nez, re - tour-nez au vil -  
la - - - ge mon seul tré - sor et la ver - tu mon

Music Example No. 2. J.A. Fisher, *À laisser moi retournez*, mm. 8-14.

The song, *Comme une vapeur mensongère*, is perhaps the most difficult of the three French songs because of the chromatic writing in the first part of song. Although Fisher rather over uses suspension dissonances in this song, it remains one of the most attractive in the entire collection. Since the actual text of the poem is very short, the composer repeats the final line several times.

Comme une vapeur mensongère, s'écoulent nos jours,  
Si le flambeau des Amours n'en éclaire le cours.  
On voit sur sa tige incertaine la Rosè de l'age,  
Mais pour la voir s'épanouir,  
Il faut l'alaine du Zéphir,  
A la fleur de l'age L'Amour doit charmer notre partàgè  
Est d'enflammer d'être Volagè sans cesser.

When compared with his earlier orchestral music such as the six published symphonies (1772) and the overture to *The Syrens* (1776), these French songs represent an advancement in the composer's harmonic vocabulary, and they contain more chromatically-altered chords, and a greater interest in harmonic contrast. In particular, Fisher makes great use of contrasting modes within the same song: all three songs begin in the minor, but end in the major. In the case of *Nous sommes nès*, this is a simple move to the relative major key. Both *Comme une vapeur mensongère* and *À laisser moi retournez*, however, move to parallel major about halfway through the texted music. The latter songs have the change of key actually notated in the score in order to avoid excessive use of accidentals. In each case, this harmonic shift helps underscore the meaning of the text.

Of interest here is the composer's concept of French musical styles. Musical tastes had changed significantly during reign of Louis XVI and Marie-

Antoinette (1774-92). Until this time, French vocal music (and particularly opera) had been stylistically isolated since the seventeenth century. Even such late French baroque composers as André-Cardinal Destouches (1672-1749), François Colin de Blamont (1690-1760), and Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764) had clung to the earlier traditions of ornate and rhythmically-complex melodies that made use of changing metres to ensure the appropriate declamation of the text. The winds of artistic change were felt in France following Marie-Antoinette's patronage of foreign-born composers such as Christoph Willibald Gluck (1714-87), Niccolò Piccinni (1728-1800) and Antonio Sacchini (1730-86). In order to be successful at the Paris Opéra, such composers had to adapt their styles to conform with French tastes. In the process, a new style was formed that combined Italian lyricism with French concerns for balance and clarity, and text settings that demonstrated careful attention to the meaning of the words and to their proper declamation.<sup>12</sup> Such stylistic changes appear not to have been lost on Fisher, for his three French songs reflect many of the attributes of the new "international" French style, although proper declamation is not always achieved.

Fisher's return to home soil is marked by the presence of three unaccompanied glees set to English texts. The use of the term "glee" in England first appeared in the mid-seventeenth century. Glees were originally written for male voices, in three or more unaccompanied parts, which featured simple harmonizations and graceful melodies. During the eighteenth century, glees were also composed for mixed voices, as well for men (Westrup, 1980, pp. 430-1). Such vocal ensemble works remained popular in Britain for social gatherings and other amateur performances well into the nineteenth century. There is nothing in these three works that would strain the resources of amateur performers. The three glees are set homophonically and are not rhythmically complex. The composer does not specify whether he intended mixed voices or that of male singers. Of particular interest is the first of these pieces, *Glee for 3 Voices*, a work that reveals Fisher's penchant for black humour with its text, "Beneath this stone lies Catharine Gray," taken from a tombstone. The second glee ("In yonder Grot") is listed as a *Serious Glee*, while the final work, the *Anacreontic Glee*, could not be less serious in nature. This work is a drinking song and its text, which begins with "Wellcome the joys we cheaply buy," makes a fitting, celebratory conclusion to Fisher's songs of travel.

Thus, Fisher's musical travelogue ends with the weary traveller returning home to celebrate with the art of his homeland. In this case, it was music associated with the well spring of amateur music-making that was an integral part of British life in the eighteenth century. Fisher's collection of songs appears to be his last new music to be published.<sup>13</sup> Appropriately, the composer's own career is mirrored in it, as it marked his return to Britain after years of musical activity on the continent.

Given the numerous published writings about music from this period, by Burney and others, it is appropriate to examine Fisher's music in their light. Certainly, Burney's writings served a critical and historical purpose that Fisher did not attempt with these songs. The composer makes no attempt to evoke earlier styles of either the French or Italian traditions, but presents the most up-to-date musical styles of these countries. It is his settings of the English glees which end his published collection that could have been composed many years earlier. Nor does one find a critical stance taken in the composition of these songs. Burney

took every opportunity to denigrate French opera, and the French vocal style in general. He found French singing to lack true expressiveness since the vocal production was always too far in the throat. Furthermore, he found French harmonies unnatural because their "modulation was . . . too studied, so much so as to be unnatural and always to disappoint the ear" (1979, p. 12). Fisher's graceful music would not appear to have offended contemporaries audiences in this area. Thus, his songs compliment Burney's writings, but provide entertainment without the rigours of either historical or critical thinking.

Fisher's *A Comparative View* allowed his aristocratic patron and others the opportunity to compare three differing national styles of music, albeit filtered through the sensibilities of a British-trained composer, without the hardships of continental travel. Savoured in the security of one's own home, where the food and the accommodation were at least familiar, there were few linguistic problems, no rocky roads and, one hopes, no robbers. For the modern listener, Fisher's collection of vocal works presents a rare view of how the various national styles of music were perceived at a time when regional and stylistic differences were beginning to disappear on the continent. Indeed, it was the very act of travel that contributed to the process of breaking down of such national stylistic differences.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Some of the travellers were ambassadors or held other political appointment in Europe. Others, such as Sir John Finch (1626-82) went abroad to study. In Finch's case, the desire to study medicine took him to Italy during the early 1650s. For some travellers, the need to improve their health in a warmer climate provided the impetus for travel. John Locke appears to have initially travelled to France for this reason in 1675. Thereafter, he eventually became an influential person in the court of Louis XIV (Lough, 1984, p. 4-7). During the eighteenth century, a different view of travel for educational purposes emerged—that of touring. This was a far less formal approach, and one in which the traveller could set his own agenda, and choose selected areas of interest for investigation. Yet the educational value of such travel was not diminished.

In 1746, Lord Chesterfield wrote to his son, admonishing him to take full advantage of his European travels to become acquainted with the customs and manners of the various countries that he visited. In particular, he wanted his son to learn to converse in foreign languages so that he could meet as many people as possible. As trade and commerce between Britain and the continent increased, the value of knowing several languages was not lost on perceptive parents. Charles Burney planned a trip to France in 1764 that he hoped would give his children much-needed world experience, claiming that either teaching them at home or having them placed in a good boarding school was "equally tedious, expensive and ineffectual" (1988, p. 156).

<sup>2</sup> Cox's list of diaries, letters, travelogues, directories and guides on continental travel is highly valuable. The author states in his preface "what I have endeavored to do in these two [sic] volumes is to list in chronological order, from the earliest date ascertainable down to and including the year 1800, all the books on foreign travels, voyages and descriptions printed in Great Britain, together with translations from foreign tongues and Continental renderings of English works—that is to say, so far as they have come to my notice" (1935, I, p. v). By far, the greatest number of works were published in the eighteenth century. An indication of this increased publication interest in the eighteenth century can be ascertained by the fact that John Lough (1984) lists only 63 such sources for his study of travel in France in the seventeenth century.

<sup>3</sup> Known initially as the Bach-Abel Concert, the series was renamed the Professional Concert after 1782 and, it presented the latest instrumental and vocal music from continental Europe well into the 1790s (Petty, 1980, p. 19).

<sup>4</sup> The French musical tradition no longer held influence over English musicians. The frequently uncomfortable political climate between France and England had effectively brought such influence to an end in the early years of the seventeenth century.

<sup>5</sup> See Petty (1980, p. 87-330) for a listing of the operatic repertory of this theatre in the period of 1760-1800. Foreign art, especially Italian opera, remained controversial and open to attack from nationalists. The one thing that could not be discounted, however, was its success with the public. This point was driven home in a review of Piccinni's *La Schiava* that was published in the *Public Advertiser* for 15 November 1767.



The Italian Opera is upon a better footing in England this day than ever it was since the King's Theatre has been confined to that sort of musical performance; from whence we may fairly conclude, that the wits have been playing the fool; that the ridicule endeavoured to be thrown upon it was unjust, and that the Italian Opera has at least the power of pleasing the Generality, in spite of the bad humour and ill directed pleasantry of a few (cited by Petty, 1980, p. 121).

<sup>6</sup> The subtitle of the collection of songs appears to indicate that the music was composed after Fisher's return to the British Isles in 1786. The exact date of publication, however, is not known with certainty, although the British Library assigns a tentative date of *ca.* 1790 to it. These songs appear to be the last new music ever published by Fisher, and it was also the only time that he worked with this printer. The Corri and Sutherland publication is not as accurate as the best work coming out of London-based publishers at the same time. Rhythmic groupings in the voice part are frequently erratic, and both note and harmonic errors can be found. It is possible that such errors result from Fisher being in Ireland and not being able to oversee the printing. One wonders if Fisher found it difficult to get his music published by 1790. Certainly, he had been out of the main stream of musical activity in London since 1780, and was likely little remembered on the eve of Haydn's years in London.

<sup>7</sup> Fiske (1986, p. 279) suggest the starting date of 1769 for Fisher's assumption of the leader's position. The most up-to-date biography of Fisher will be found in the *Revised New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (ed. Stanley Sadie, in press), by the present author.

<sup>8</sup> Fisher also sketches in the right-hand part of the keyboard accompaniment in the vocal part when there is no texted music. These indications are sometimes in need of some revision to be effective.

<sup>9</sup> The practice may also reflect a certain snobbery on the part of the composer who revelled in his having received the degree of Doctor of Music from Magdalen college, Oxford, in 1777.

<sup>10</sup> I am indebted to Dr. Victoria Meredith and Dr. Donald J. Neville (both from the Faculty of Music, The University of Western Ontario) for identifying the texts of the three Italian songs in the collection. All three are drawn from the published canzonettas of Pietro Metastasio, and use the author's titles: *La libertà a Nice* (Vienna, 1733); *Palinodia a Nice* (Vienna, 1746) and *La partenza a Nice* (Vienna, 1746).

<sup>11</sup> Many other works in this genre could be cited. Such works were well known in London, where they proved to be highly popular with audiences. Piccinni's opera was first performed there in 1766, and Sacchini's work in 1771. Both were revived in London in 1782 (Petty, 1980, p. 181).

<sup>12</sup> Such stylistic changes have been examined by the present author (1992).

<sup>13</sup> The first song of the collection was reprinted in Dublin by Hime, around 1795.

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