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**‘When tired of writing, I apply to music’: Music in Matthew Flinders’ Life**

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On 20 November 1805, Matthew Flinders, RN, wrote to his wife Ann from ‘Williams Plains in the Isle of France’:

Comparatively with my situation in this island for the first 20 months I am now very happy; and yet I often retire to the little pavilion which is my study and bed room, and with my flute in my hand and sometimes tears in my eyes I warble over the little evening song of which I sent thee a copy. Ah my beloved, then my heart overleaps the distance of half a world and wholly embraces thee.<sup>1</sup>

Musical ability is not the best-known attribute of Flinders, the explorer and navigator who had captained the *Investigator* on the first circumnavigation of the Australian continent 1801-3. He had been a captive of the French governor of Ile de France, or Mauritius, since December 1803, when his ship had limped into Port Louis seeking urgent repairs on its way from Sydney to London. If he had known that the war between England and France had resumed, he might have risked the longer trip to Cape Town, though the 29-ton schooner *Cumberland* was so leaky, and its pumps so worn out, that he had grave fears for its safety at sea. Following the circumnavigation, he had already survived one shipwreck in his attempt to get back to England to replace the rotting *Investigator* and continue his exploration of the continent. On Ile de France, suspected of being a spy, and provoking the anger of General Decaen by failing to hide his indignation, Flinders was detained indefinitely, kept first under close guard in a single room in the Café Marengo with John Aken, the Master from the *Investigator*, and then moved to the Maison Despaux, known as ‘The Garden Prison’, in March 1804, where he joined some eight English prisoners of war.

It was in the Maison Despaux that Flinders first wrote in his Private Journal about the place of music in his daily life:

My time is now employed as follows. Before breakfast my time is devoted to the latin language, to bring up what I formerly learned. After breakfast I am employed making out a fair copy of the *Investigators* log in lieu of my own which was spoiled at the shipwreck. When tired of writing, I apply to music, and when my fingers are tired with the flute, I write again until dinner. After dinner we amuse ourselves with billiards until tea, and afterwards walk in the garden till dusk. From thence till supper I make one at Pleyels quartettes. ... [M]y time does not pass wearily or uselessly run.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Matthew Flinders, *Personal Letters from an Extraordinary Life* ed. Paul Brunton (Sydney: Hordern House in association with the State Library of NSW, 2002) 135

<sup>2</sup>Matthew Flinders, *Private Journal* ed. Anthony J. Brown and Gillian Dooley (Adelaide: Friends of the State Library of South Australia, 2005) 33.

It is not known when Flinders learned music, though his father recorded in his accounts that he spent 8 shillings on buying him a German flute in November 1788, when he was 14.<sup>3</sup> He intended Matthew to follow him into the profession of surgeon and apothecary, which entailed lessons in reading, writing and Latin at the local free school in Donington, Lincolnshire, until he was twelve, followed by Greek and literature at a boarding school in Horbling for eighteen months, but some attention to the arts was clearly not to be despised. In 1785 Flinders Senior notes that he has ‘put Matthew ... to a dancing master ... as a little address seems to be a necessary addition in this age.’<sup>4</sup> Music lessons are not specifically mentioned although, as Geoffrey Ingleton points out, neither is mathematics, in which ‘presumably the young scholar received some tuition’ as it was ‘a subject in which he became most proficient later in life’.<sup>5</sup> Of course, Matthew had other ideas – formed, he later claimed, by reading Robinson Crusoe<sup>6</sup> – and left Lincolnshire 18 months later to go to sea.

The National Maritime Museum points out that ‘[m]usic has played a central part in life at sea providing not only entertainment and contributing to the health and morale of seamen but also providing rhythm and cohesion to the everyday tasks of sailors and fishermen.’<sup>7</sup> Sea shanties and hornpipes are the natural associations one makes between music and the sea. Flinders reported in *A Voyage to Terra Australis* that, on crossing the Equator,

It was a part of my plan for preserving the health of the people, to promote active amusements amongst them, so long as it did not interfere with the duties of the ship; and therefore the ancient ceremonies used on this occasion, were allowed to be performed this evening; and the ship being previously put under snug sail, the seamen were furnished with the means, and the permission, to conclude the day with merriment.<sup>8</sup>

The means for merriment no doubt involved alcohol, but it is hard to imagine this scene without musical accompaniment. Among the officers, too, the ability to amuse oneself and perhaps one’s shipmates with music during the long journey would have been valuable, and the flute, unlike larger instruments, is eminently portable. According to *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*, ‘flute playing became one of the marks of a cultivated gentleman’ in the eighteenth century.<sup>9</sup> The German flute which Flinders possessed may have been one of the new four-keyed flutes which became available in the last quarter of the century, a great improvement on the earlier one-keyed instruments: Burney noted ‘that it was “natural to

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew Flinders, Senior, ‘*Gratefull to Providence: The Diary and Accounts of Matthew Flinders, Surgeon, Apothecary and Man-Midwife 1775-1802*’ ed. Martyn Beardsley and Nicholas Bennett, Vol. II (Lincoln: The Lincoln Record Society, 2009) 50.

<sup>4</sup> Flinders, Senior, 22.

<sup>5</sup> Geoffrey Ingleton, *Matthew Flinders: Navigator and Chartmaker* (Guildford: Genesis Publications, 1986) 1.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Biographical Memoir of Captain Matthew Flinders, RN’, *The Naval Chronicle for 1814* (London: Joyce Goale, 1814) 178.

<sup>7</sup> National Maritime Museum, *Research guide M7: Music and the sea: Sources of information in the National Maritime Museum*. Online. Accessed 27 December 2010. <<http://www.nmm.ac.uk/researchers/library/research-guides/general-maritime/research-guide-m7-music-and-the-sea-sources-of-information-in-the-national-maritime-museum>>

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Flinders, *Voyage to Terra Australis* Volume 1 (London: Nicol, 1814) 29.

<sup>9</sup> Don Michael Randel, *The Harvard Dictionary of Music* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2003) 320.

those instruments to be out of tune”.<sup>10</sup> The violin was also popular among male amateurs. The naturalist on the *Investigator*, Robert Brown, played the violin, as did Thomy Pitot, Flinders’ closest friend among the French settler families on Mauritius. The fact that a quartet (typically consisting of two treble instruments such as violins or flutes, a tenor instrument, such as a viola, and a bass, such as a cello) could be recruited from among a group of nine English military officers in the Maison Despaux attests to the fact that some degree of musical accomplishment was not unusual in the English officer of the period. Indeed, Captain John Hunter, under whom Flinders sailed as a midshipman on the *Reliance* on his first journey to Australia in 1795, was musically inclined. He had not been permitted to pursue music as a profession, as he had wished, but had been allowed to learn music from the organist and composer Dr Charles Burney in his early teens.<sup>11</sup>

Thomy Pitot and his brother Edouard first met Flinders in August 1804 when they dined with another prisoner in the mess at the Maison Despaux:

They were very agreeable and seemed interested to do him and me service. They have lent us books and music and behaved more liberally than is customary to any strangers, but especially to prisoners and Englishmen.<sup>12</sup>

Pitot remained a friend for the rest of Flinders’ life, and while he was detained made every effort to help him, by advocating for him with the authorities as well as by providing books, music and friendship. It was to Pitot that Flinders wrote his first letter in French in September 1805: he had no knowledge of the language before arriving in Ile de France. He soon became fluent in French: an ear for languages seems to be frequently associated with an aptitude for music, and perhaps this was true in Flinders’ case.

Music continued to provide Flinders with solace and recreation throughout his long detention. In the last days before leaving Maison Despaux to take up residence with Madame d’Arifat on her plantation in the south-west of the island, he wrote a long account of his activities on one day. Among the reading, conversation, walking and contemplation, he devotes a paragraph to music:

Took up my flute and played the 1<sup>st</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> Duo of Pleyel’s opera 9. Note, the first commences in a grand stile, and is sweetly plaintive in some parts of it. The Andante of the 5 is marked for minuet time, whereas the time is 2/4. Must have all Pleyels musick when I return to England, that is set for the flute, and Mozarts, and Haydns, and some of Hoffmeisters and Deviennes, but the whole will be too expensive, musick is so very dear in England; and indeed so is almost everything else.

These are the words of a musical literate, if not an expert, who is aware that a minuet should be in triple rather than duple time, and who knows the principal composers of flute music of the age. In his lifetime, Austrian-born French composer Ignaz Pleyel (1757-1831) was as famous as Haydn and Mozart. His music was typically easy enough for the amateur to attempt, which added to his popularity at the time, although it has perhaps contributed to his music’s failure to maintain a high reputation since his death. His Opera 9 seems to have been

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<sup>10</sup> Quoted in Adam Carse, *Musical Wind Instruments* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1965) 87.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Barnes, *An Unlikely Leader: The Life and Times of Captain John Hunter* (Sydney: Sydney University Press, 2009) 27.

<sup>12</sup> Flinders, *Private Journal* 40.

‘A Second set of three quintetts for two violins, two tenors and a violoncello’, published in London in 1787, which does not tally with the description Flinders gives of at least five duos. There is a set of six duets for violin, opus 8, which is a possible alternative candidate. But Pleyel was an extremely prolific composer and his music was published in many editions and arrangements, so it may be almost impossible to identify the piece Flinders means.<sup>13</sup>

Young ladies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were unlikely to learn the flute or violin, and were more often steered towards the more sedentary pursuits of harp and keyboard playing:

No lady considering herself worthy of that title would blow into anything – this might result in a reddening of the face or unseemly heaving of the bosom. Equally, the violin was not suitable ... This left our would-be heroines with the principle choices of singing, the harpsichord/pianoforte or, if they had the financial means, the harp.<sup>14</sup>

Flinders met several female keyboard and harp players on Mauritius. Music remained part of his everyday life, both in solitude and society, when he moved to the d’Arifat’s estate. He was almost immediately introduced to Madame Couve, a neighbour who had two teenage daughters:

She invited me kindly to come frequently, every day if I pleased, to dine and sup, and spend the morning or evening, in a neighbourly way, without ceremony. ... [t]he invitation was not the less agreeable for that the two young ladies were musicians and had good voices.<sup>15</sup>

He did visit the Couve family often, but he soon met another musician in the neighbourhood. On 27 November 1805 he records, ‘The afternoon was occupied with music, in accompanying Mad. Chazals harpsichord with the flute. This lady is indeed an excellent performer, and is besides one of the most agreeable women I have ever met with.’<sup>16</sup> Her husband, Toussaint Antoine de Chazal, was a cultivated man, a trained artist, who in 1807 painted the only life-size portrait of Flinders made during his lifetime, which now hangs in the Art Gallery of South Australia. Over the ensuing years, as his detention dragged on, he often described being entertained by music, sometimes as a listener, and more often as a player, most frequently accompanied by Madame Chazal.

In March 1809 he reported that he was ‘copying music for Mad. D[’Arifat] to take to Bourbon for Mad. Desbasns.,’ her married daughter. He could clearly read music, as this is an essential skill for playing chamber music, and as can be seen from the manuscript of the song he sent to Ann in November 1805, his music copying was clear and competent. The manuscript survives in the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich. He attributes the music to Haydn, though I have been unable to identify the melody. The words he wrote himself: his literary talents were not inconsiderable, as is demonstrated by his delightful essay ‘A

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<sup>13</sup> The first movement of no. 1 of Opus 8 is Allegro Moderato, with a strong chordal opening which could be played in a ‘grand stile’, and the second movement is a minuet with some ‘plaintive’ passages. The second movement of no. 5 is an Andante in 6/8 time in the Augener edition edited by F. Hermann. It could have been notated in 2/4 time with triplets, and marked as a minuet, in an earlier edition. This would be odd but would explain the anomaly that Flinders notes.

<sup>14</sup> Mike Parker, ‘Tidings of my harp,’ *Jane Austen’s Regency World* (44: Mar/Apr 2010) 35.

<sup>15</sup> Flinders, *Private Journal* 84.

<sup>16</sup> Flinders, *Private Journal* 106.

Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim', written in 1807. The lyrics of 'My Evening Song', though couched in the conventional sentimental language of the age, are nevertheless heartfelt and expressive:

Why Henry didst thou leave me, thus leave me here to mourn?  
Ah, cruel, thou deceivedst me, I'll ne'er see thy return.  
Thou knew'st how much I lov'd thee, yet could resolve to go.  
My griefs could nothing move thee, though I was sunk in woe.

Yet why do I thus blame thee, alas thou couldst not stay,  
For when stern duty calls thee thou couldst not but obey  
Thy looks bespoke the anguish, the struggle in thy breast ...

Although this, with its strong rhetoric of the implacable demands of duty, is of course a rationalization of his actions which he knew were deep source of anguish to his wife, it is typical of Flinders that he writes in the persona of the deserted wife. A capacity for empathy was an abiding characteristic, whether he was regretting the death of his cat Trim at the hands of a slave to whom he attributed hunger rather than malice,<sup>17</sup> or imagining the feelings of the Australian Aborigines upon seeing strangers arriving on the shores.<sup>18</sup> However, the verses he sent to Ann with the Haydn air were not finished. He wrote 'to be completed' in place of the last line of the second verse, perhaps, as I surmised in a short essay written in 2002, because he did not know how to bring it to a conclusion: 'Even his rational mind would superstitiously shy away from anticipating a happy ending for his life's romance.'<sup>19</sup> With that essay I included an arrangement of the song for flute and voice, and for the purpose I wrote a final line for the second verse.

However, at that time I was not aware that the manuscript at Greenwich is accompanied by a document in another hand, finishing the second verse and adding two more verses.

*While pangs of bitter sorrow. thy inmost Soul oppress'd -*

*Sad was the fatal moment which tore thee from my arms,  
What hours since then I've counted of misery & alarms -  
Ah hast thou in this absence let Fancy dwell as me?*

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<sup>17</sup> See Flinders, *Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim* (Sydney: John Ferguson; Halstead Press, 1985) 45.

<sup>18</sup> 'I had always found the natives of this country to avoid those who seemed anxious for communication; whereas, when left entirely alone, they would usually come down after having watched us for a few days. Nor does this conduct seem to be unnatural; for what, in such case, would be the conduct of any people, ourselves for instance, were we living in a state of nature, frequently at war with our neighbours, and ignorant of the existence of any other nation? On the arrival of strangers, so different in complexion and appearance to ourselves, having power to transport themselves over, and even living upon an element which to us was impassable, the first sensation would probably be terror, and the first movement flight. We should watch these extraordinary people from our retreats in the woods and rocks, and if we found ourselves sought and pursued by them, should conclude their designs to be inimical; but if, on the contrary, we saw them quietly employed in occupations which had no reference to us, curiosity would get the better of fear; and after observing them more closely, we should ourselves seek a communication. Such seemed to have been the conduct of these Australians.' Flinders, *Voyage* Vol. 1, 146.

<sup>19</sup> Gillian Dooley, 'My Evening Song', *Alas! For the Pelicans: Flinders, Baudin and Beyond: Essays and Poems* (Adelaide: Wakefield Press, 2002) 124.

*Or sigh with ardent wishes, thy faithful Love to see?*

*My soul with deep felt anguish, incessant mourns for thee  
In pining grief I languish & silent agony,  
Will comforts cheering sunshine e'er beam on this sore heart?  
Yes, when we meet, my Henry, never again to part.*

The NMM website notes that ‘these remaining words may have been added by Ann Flinders to the original, unfinished, song by Matthew,’ and the handwriting matches that in Ann Flinders’ surviving manuscripts.<sup>20</sup> It is surely most likely that she wrote these yearning words soon after she received the song, some years before Flinders was released and returned to England in October 1810. Both these lyrics and Flinders’ verses show a sensitivity to accommodating words to the simple and unaffected melody, allowing the rhythm of the words to fit the tune without any unnatural or misplaced stresses. It is touching to think that, even over the distance that separated them, they were able to collaborate on this small creative project. Eventually, after the nine years of separation which had followed their first two months of marriage, they had a mere three and a half years together before Flinders died in July 1814, at the age of 40.

Once Flinders was back in England, music occupied little of his time. He was busy working on his voyage and had many other anxieties and distractions, as the Private Journal shows. And, despite his exhortation to Ann in a letter of 18 December 1800 to ‘[l]earn music’ as one of many ways of keeping herself busy during their separation,<sup>21</sup> she was not musical: her talents lay in the visual arts: after Flinders’ death she painted a series of very attractive botanical watercolours. He does say that on 19 October 1811 he ‘went out ... and bought music.’<sup>22</sup> There is, however, no indication that he ever found the time to play it, and the social side of musicianship, so important a pastime and distraction from his worries on Mauritius, seems to have vanished from his busy life in London. Reading the Private Journal, it is tempting to see the later years on Mauritius, even with all their frustrations, as a happier, more relaxed period, spent with congenial friends in leisurely pursuits such as reading for pleasure, walking in the country and playing music, than the three years that followed, which were crammed with close, gruelling work with little official acknowledgement from the Admiralty, on half pay, with a wife and later a child who were often unwell, and followed by six months of agonising illness. Even before he left Mauritius, he wrote to his friend Charles Desbassayns, ‘Now that I am certain of going, the pleasure I had in contemplating this event in perspective, is vanished. My heart is oppressed at the idea of quitting my friends here, perhaps forever.’<sup>23</sup> One cannot but wonder whether, in the middle of July 1813 when almost all his journal entries consisted of variations on ‘Worked all day at the charts, and writing in the evening,’ he sometimes looked back with fond nostalgia at the days when he would spend the afternoon at the Chazals’ playing tric-trac, followed by an evening accompanying Madame in Pleyel’s sonatas for flute and harpsichord.

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<sup>20</sup> National Maritime Museum, ‘Handwritten Sheet Music and Words’, FLI/25, Online, 28 December 2010, <http://www.nmm.ac.uk/flinders/DisplayDocument.cfm?ID=139&browseBy=Author>. A transcript of the words is available online. The manuscript of the words was checked by NMM staff against another surviving Ann Flinders manuscript in January 2011, and they have confirmed that it matches (Nigel Rigby, email communication, 11 January 2011).

<sup>21</sup> Flinders, *Personal Letters* 55.

<sup>22</sup> Flinders, *Private Journal* 380.

<sup>23</sup> Flinders, *Personal Letters* 199.