

Glasgow paper

[\[Click – excerpt: Webbe 1\]](#)

Good morning, everyone. That was the opening bars of Samuel Webbe’s *Discord*, and although it’s at odds with this cheerful scene from 1826, it serves to remind us of two things: one, that England had known two decades of war only 10 years previously, and two, that the glee could be a very serious matter. To both of these points we shall return.

Vaughan Williams was writing in 1914 when he described the glee as “[an] exclusively English art [form] - ... small in scope, and not of heroic build.” Here, he thinks, “the English character found its true utterance; directly it went further it began to lose itself.” That quote has, for the last century or so, set the tone for the consideration of the glee – and that’s if anyone bothered to consider it at all. The most substantial work is that of an American musicologist, Emanuel Rubin, who is quick to point out that the glee represents a very English “left turn when the rest of the parade had turned right” and wonders why. This paper hopes to show that the answer is partly musical, partly social, and partly sentimental.

As miniatures go, the glee takes up a lot of space, at least on paper. In the 1880s one writer listed ‘upwards of 23,000’ partsongs published in the British Isles since 1750, and reckoned that was only half the repertoire. This popularity was helped considerably by the developments in printing, and by the valuable prizes offered for new compositions, notably by the London Noblemen and Gentlemen’s Catch Club, or ‘Nobs and Gents’ as it came to be known, for 30 years from 1763. Gleees were still being anthologised in the early 1900s, but by then the clubs were almost all gone and prints like this had been consigned to museums. In fact, a Canterbury Catch Club evening was re-enacted in 1888 for the visiting Australian cricket team as a curiosity from bygone days.

In a century in which entertainment became more commodified, more inclusive, and more polite in the 19th century, the music was tainted by its association with [\[Click – three drinking men\]](#) tavern and club. In the late 18th century, the freelance musician RJS Stevens had been horrified at the bibulous excesses of the gentry in this sort of gathering – he describes the songs sung at the *Je Ne Sais Quoi Club* (where the Prince Regent was permanent Chairman) as “disgusting, disgraceful, and horrible to hear.” Almost a century later, Thackeray said of the Prince Regent: “It was an unlucky thing for this doomed one ... [that] he should have a beautiful voice, which led him directly in the way of drink ... Singing after dinner was the universal fashion of the day, occasioning the consumption of a prodigious deal of fermented liquor.”

But the glee was perfectly capable of being accessible, and polite – and commercially successful. The real reasons for its fall from grace are inherent in its style and content. This is not simply to dismiss them, as most people do: “trite lyrics and part-writing whose textbook correctness is matched only by a fear of modulation” is one apt description of most gleees. It is to note that they no longer appeal to our sentiments as they once did. This example makes both points succinctly:

[\[Click – excerpt: If the Prize 1\]](#)

In fairness to Benjamin Cooke, whose music here sets a few couplets by Edward Mulso, we need to be clear that this is not a piece which is trying to take itself at all seriously. The last couplet reads: “The Prize obtain’d, with me you’ll hold / Sterling Wit is sterling Gold.” Note the deft word-play. The prizes in question were those medals offered by the Catch Club. But the *middle* couplet has a point to make:

[Click – excerpt: *If the Prize 2*]

“Sense and harmony combin’d / Make a banquet for the mind.” In jovial form, Mulso – and Cooke – have hit on something important. To understand what, we need to recall what a literate age this was. The novel had only just been invented, and was exuberantly experimenting with the possibilities of the form. Perhaps the best example is *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman*, by Lawrence Sterne, published in nine volumes from 1759-67: a wonderfully whimsical work self-consciously claiming to tell a story whilst actually doing no such thing. For at least one writer – John Brewer, in *The Pleasures of the Imagination*, it’s a fine example of a cultural shift from an Age of Politeness to the new Age of Sentiment, which sought a new kind of refined sensibility as much moral as it was aesthetic: “Sentimental works wore their heart on the sleeve. They were passionately engaged and highly sententious ... overtly committed to a cause.” Clearly, they expected to be taken seriously – as did the glee.

It is not surprising, then, that the subject matter of the glee ranged far more widely than that of its ancestor, the madrigal – of whose heritage the glee composers were very well aware – and its cousin the catch. Whilst much of the repertoire encourages alcohol-fuelled conviviality, those pieces sit cheek by bucolic jowl with texts treating war, philosophy, politics, economics, religion, and death.

The texts speak a language bequeathed by Shakespeare and enriched by the poets to whom the glee composers turned in the later 1700s: James Macpherson’s quasi-mystical ‘Ossian’ (frequently set by John Wall Callcott), Milton (John Stafford Smith’s *Blest Pair of Sirens*), Spencer (Smith’s *Flora Now Calleth Forth Each Flower*), Southey (Callcott, again), and Shenstone are some of those who might be said to have made the more sublime contributions to the genre. In choosing to set this poetry, the glee composers’ overriding aesthetic intention was to arouse a response which was as much intellectual as emotional: as the word ‘sentiment’ suggests, they sought to arouse *feelings in the mind*. For the Georgians, this was firmly associated with moral and aesthetic refinement. For the glee composers, the setting of fine texts to music was the ideal vehicle for such a noble aesthetic aim.

William Horsley’s *Lo, On Yon Long-Resounding Shore* serves both to exemplify this aesthetic and point us to an understanding of its eventual decline. The poetry of the Revd. John Ogilvie, DD, is seldom anthologised these days, and you are probably about to see why: this poem – the eighth verse of *Ode to the Genius of Shakespeare* – is a highly-coloured evocation of the mouth of Hell. Here’s the opening:

[Click – excerpt: *Horsley 1: 1.03, up to the Zephir’s wing...*]

Note the scrupulous attention to word-setting: after that expansive bass solo, the rock tottering over the headlong deep is very graphic, and I hope you heard the emphatic homophony on “infant gore”. The murmuring of the wind is delicate, but I faded out there just as the storm was getting up. Here’s

the end of it, leading into a lovely moment at which Fierce Winter's scowling eye "blots the fair mantle of the breathing Spring":

[\[Click – excerpt: Horsley 2\]](#)

We'll skip over the 'ruffled sky' (you'll just have to take my word for it that's it's suitably foreboding) and move on to the entrance of the 'yelling harpies' - the witches from *Macbeth*, just to ramp up the Gothic horror of the scene. This leads into a passage depicting the black gloom and the pale furnace gleaming with brimstone blue:

[\[Click – excerpt: Horsley 3\]](#)

All of which music, it seems to me, is a well-crafted, very expressive depiction of the grisly subject matter, paying fine attention to the detail of the text and painting in even more vivid colour. Thus far, I'm persuaded.

Now the piece ends with the assembled fiends dancing on the bubbling tide. I'll play it in a moment, but here, I begin to question Horsley's judgement – though some of you may have beaten me to this point already. Whatever the imperatives of the sentimental aesthetic, there's no denying that Georgian taste seems to have been very keen on an upbeat final section, ideally in triple time – rather like the final movement of a suite, and there is an interesting comparison to be made there, some other time. This may not sound like the most appropriate treatment of a serious subject, and at the risk of damning Horsley by comparison before I've even levelled the charge, I would point out that there are fine examples of glee composers plumbing depths of great solemnity whilst satisfying this otherwise arbitrary preference – Stafford Smith in *Sleep, Poor Youth*, or Samuel Webbe in *Discord, Dire Sister*. But Horsley depicts this ghoulish scene at the mouth of Hell in a cheerful E flat major and a jolly 12/8. See what you think; here are the closing moments:

[\[Click – excerpt: Horsley 4\]](#)

And the whole section is three or four times that long... What are we to make of that disjunct treatment? I'm afraid I hear an attempt at a *Danse Macabre* which doesn't quite come off, and – worse – makes the preceding, otherwise dignified, setting seem somewhat trite as a result. Of course the comparison is anachronistic; perhaps it is fairer to say, here is an example of an emotional load too heavy for the diminutive glee to bear. Michael Hurd makes a similar point when he notes that the glee composers may be seen to be fretting at the limitations of the form, as in Marsh's *The City Feast* – positively operatic in its depiction of gluttonous debauchery in which an alderman chops his thumb off; and Callcott's *Abelard*, as Horsley puts it, may be "among the most singular of my friend's compositions in consequence of the introduction of one part in recitative, *accompanied* by the rest. The experiment was a bold one, and 'Abelard' was very popular for a time, but it is now seldom performed [this is 1824]. The general feeling seems to be against the application of the human voice to the purpose of mere accompaniment."

Whilst it's reassuring to see Horsley express some reservation about his father-in-law's aesthetic judgement, it also reminds us that we may be looking back through an inappropriate telescope. The sentimental aesthetic demanded a detailed treatment of a text which was itself a very self-conscious

artefact. Remember Brewer's comment about the heart on the sleeve. By definition, this is artifice on display. Not for the Georgians Dowland's dictum about art concealing art. Overwrought in the older sense, such over-engineering now seems to us somewhat forced and frenetic; for the glee composers, it was an assertion of a greatly refined craft which touched humankind in places which became oddly taboo as the Victorian age superseded the Georgian.

A still wider perspective asks what it is that prompts the need for something. Ian Bradley, musician and cleric, makes a persuasive case in his recent book on Sullivan's sacred music, *Lost Chords and Christian Soldiers*, for a re-assessment of Victorian sentimentality away from a view of it as a mawkish, superficial self-indulgence towards a more sympathetic understanding of it as an expression of a deeper longing for something lost – certainty of faith, or the sense of community in the face of the imperatives of industrialisation an emerging capitalist society. Whether or not you agree with the conclusion, I hope you'll allow the methodology. In the case of such a self-consciously nationalistic genre like the delicate glee, we might wonder: against what are we shoring up our sense of identity? Why do we need to assert the importance of our national voice? Just as we may see the religiosity that suffuses so much Victorian art as a reaction against the threat of secularism, might it be the case that the glee's expression of our British-ness was in part a reaction to the loss of colonial acquisitions in America, and the perceived threat from across the Channel which eventually erupted into 20 years of war? As Jenny Uglow points out, the Napoleonic Wars directly affected one family in every five as the country became horribly drained of financial and human resources. We've become keenly aware in the last year or so how the Great War formed a nation's consciousness; Uglow's book, *In These Times*, does the same thing for that much older conflict. Boney the bogeyman, she says, became the stuff of children's nightmares. Boys who were toddlers when war first broke out fought at Waterloo. Two decades of war take their psychological toll, for a nation as for its citizens. Perhaps it's not surprising that when that horror had passed, in the face of more philosophical political and theological challenges, Victorian art felt a need for a calmer aesthetic. So the closing bars of Webbe's *Discord* are quite appropriate.

[\[Click – excerpt: Webbe 2\]](#)