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## English Clarinet Music, 1800-1870: Reclaiming a Repertory

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My task in this essay is to expose what I think is a worthwhile but neglected repertory of clarinet music; that is, English clarinet music written between about 1800 and 1870. I shall offer just a few examples of what is in fact an extensive body of works that has gone largely unheeded by clarinetists. At the same time, I want to situate this repertory in its historical context, because I believe its value lies not just in its intrinsic musical merits, but also in its capacity to inform us more fully of musical life in nineteenth-century England. I'd like to begin by outlining briefly a few recurrent ideas in the historiography of English music. General histories of English music give a poor impression of the nineteenth century. The standard scholarly narrative of the period runs something like this: the first seventy years or so of the century comprised a period in which native composers produced no music of quality; the best of their works merely aped Mendelssohn, and the rest were clumsily crafted, devoid of serious content, and unworthy of the least attention. Then, with the appearance of Hubert Parry and Charles Stanford in the 1870s, English music was "saved," so to speak. These men, through their activities as composers and teachers, triggered a so-called musical renaissance in the last decades of the century.

So goes the standard narrative, though I've presented it here in a most condensed and unsubtle version. Lest you think I exaggerate, let me cite comments from two relatively recent historians who represent this view. First, from Peter Pirie, whose book entitled *The English Musical Renaissance* was published in 1979. He minces no words in stating that, "the sum total of our musical achievement in the Victorian era was meager, reactionary, and undistinguished." [Pirie, 22](#). Percy Young, in his 1967 *History of British Music*, evinces a similar disdain-hidden behind a thin veil of humor-when he remarks that, "it is conventional to take a gloomy view of an age in which the top composer was William Sterndale Bennett, and in which Henry Smart was even counted as a composer at all." [Young, 418](#). Underlying these views (sometimes quite explicitly) is a comparison with the music of the great German masters of the day, and the assumption that because English music is no match for that of Schumann and Brahms, its neglect is therefore deserved. I would like to suggest that we break away from this fixation on the "cult of genius"-that we ask different questions of this music, and see what it can tell us about its own, unique context. I want to take some steps toward reclaiming the repertory of clarinet music by English composers written between about 1800 and 1870. The results, I hope, will be a fuller picture of clarinet life in nineteenth-century England, and also some new and worthwhile music that will enrich our own clarinet lives.

I'll start with an example that is, happily, becoming increasingly well-known: the clarinet concerto by James Hook, written in 1812. This concerto is available in two modern published editions, and has recently been recorded on a period clarinet by Colin Lawson. This is the first clarinet work by an English composer that can be placed chronologically in the nineteenth century. Let's listen to a bit of the first movement; I'll play an excerpt from Mr. Lawson's wonderful recording, and I'm grateful to

him for granting me permission to use it in this talk.

Musical Example #1, [Hook: Concerto, mvt. 1, 2:15-4:50](#)

[Not included in the Internet version of this paper for reasons of copyright; please refer to the recording listed at the [end of this paper](#).]



James Hook (1746-1827)

We don't know for whom this concerto was written, nor do we know the occasion; but we can make some educated guesses about these things. Hook was a prominent figure in London's musical life. He was employed for nearly fifty years (from 1774 to 1820) as organist, composer, and music director at Vauxhall Gardens - one of the so-called "pleasure gardens" to which Londoners went for entertainments in the summer. At Vauxhall, on a warm summer evening, visitors could stroll beneath thousands of lamps that illuminated the gardens; while they dined *al fresco*, they would enjoy a concert of orchestral music that usually lasted for about three hours and included both vocal and instrumental works. Documentation about the programming and personnel for these concerts is slim, since actual programs are extant for only a couple of seasons in the 1790s. These inform us, however, that in addition to overtures, symphonies, and vocal music, there were at least two concertos performed at each concert. One was inevitably an organ concerto, performed by Hook himself, while the other was performed by either a guest soloist or a member of the band. We know that the band employed clarinetists, and the early programs chronicle

performances of wind concertos, including some for the clarinet. So perhaps Hook's 1812 concerto was written to be played at Vauxhall. Who might have been the performer? We can only guess, but it is likely that it would have been an English player, since it seems that Hook was a great promoter of English composers and performers. [Figure one](#) is a list of the known English players who, in terms of chronology, might be possibilities. Of these players, circumstantial evidence seems to favor Edward Hopkins as the likeliest candidate. In 1812 he was in the prime of his career, and the fact that he was later appointed music director at Vauxhall suggests that he had a prior association with that institution. As for the other names on the list, little is known about James Oliver or George Hopkins; both John and William Mahon were in their 60s in 1812, and cutting back on their engagements; and Willman can be discounted because he lived in Ireland between 1790 and 1816. Of course it is possible that the performer of Hook's concerto was a foreigner, or an English player whose name has simply not yet come to light. Given the available evidence, however, my vote goes to Edward Hopkins.

We now come to Thomas Lindsay Willman, whose name has just been mentioned. He was by all accounts the greatest English clarinetist of the early nineteenth century. We know that he, like many instrumentalists of the day, composed works for his own performance; three compositions can be traced to Willman's name, but sadly all are lost. Willman's performing activities have been wonderfully documented by Pamela Weston, however I should like to mention an unremarked performance in which he took part in 1836. The work performed was a sextet for flute, clarinet, viola, cello, double bass, and piano by the composer Cipriani Potter.

Though now forgotten, Potter was one of the most prominent and respected English musicians of his day. He was a fine pianist, and gave the English premieres of several concertos by Mozart and Beethoven. He was a founding faculty member at the Royal Academy of Music, and soon took a major role in the administration of that institution as well. He was quite influential as a teacher; among his students at the RAM were William Sterndale Bennett and George Alexander Macfarren. As evidence of the high esteem in which Potter was held, let me read to you a few lines written by an anonymous music critic in the *Musical World* in 1846:



Cipriani Potter (1792-1871)



Thomas Lindsay Willman  
(1784-1840)

“the true artist must inevitably feel an interest to any new work that may proceed from the pen of Mr. Potter, one of the greatest living ornaments of the art of music in its integrity-and, we say it with pride, an Englishman. We are glad to find the public press acknowledging the claims of Mr. Potter as the origin of our improvement, both as pianists and composers of this country-to him indeed we owe more than can be expressed-to him we are indebted for our progressing position as a musical nation-to him we owe the best musicians we possess” [Musical World, XXI: 291; quoted in Philip H. Peter, "The Life and Work of Cipriani Potter (1782-1871)", 2 vols., Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1972, vol. I, p. 153.]

Potter's sextet was written in 1836 and performed at a concert on June 13th of that year. The players were all close friends of Potter who performed with him regularly; besides Willman on the clarinet (and of course Potter himself at the piano), they were Charles Nicholson on the flute, Johann Moralt on the viola, Robert Lindley on the cello, and the celebrated Domenico Dragonetti on bass. The work received a favorable notice in the *Musical World*. The sextet is a large-scale work in four movements. Let's hear a bit of the second movement, which is an Andante.



Musical Example #2, [Potter, Sextette, mvt. 2, mm. 90-157](#)

A slightly younger contemporary of Willman was the clarinetist Joseph Williams. He was a close associate of Willman, playing 2nd to him in the Philharmonic Society and then taking over the principal position on Willman's death in 1840. Williams was also the leader of Queen Victoria's private band. Like Willman, Williams composed works for his own performance; a concerto from 1819 or before is lost, but a set of two character pieces called *Pensées fugitives* was published in 1855, and a copy of this print can be found at the Royal Academy of Music. The second of these two pieces is entitled "Bolero." It is a curious mixture of quasi-exoticism, Victorian sentimentality, and sheer virtuosity-and makes for entertaining listening.



Musical Example #3, [Williams, "Bolero," beginning to end of "B" section](#)

It should be noted that this composition bears a dedication to the great Henry Lazarus, who was England's most prominent clarinetist after Willman's death. Lazarus, too, wrote works for his own performance; most of these are sets of variations based on opera themes or national airs. Clarinetists today will be familiar with the Fantasia on Themes from *I Puritani*, published in a modern edition by Colin Bradbury; there are in addition to this at least four other works of a similar nature written by Lazarus.

Lazarus also comes into the picture in connection with two works written at his request by the composer George Alexander Macfarren. These are two songs with clarinet obbligato, a type of work that found a place especially close to the hearts of English performers and audiences. One is a poignant setting of Shelley's mournful poem, "The widow bird;" and the other is a cheerful ditty called "Pack clouds away," to an Elizabethan lyric by Thomas Heywood. Both songs were published in 1867. In "Pack Clouds Away," Macfarren's lively musical setting, complete with bird-calls in the clarinet, admirably matches the spirit of Heywood's poem. The text of the song is printed as [Figure 2](#) at the end of this essay.

Musical Example #4, [Macfarren, "Pack clouds away," 1st verse](#)



Sir George Alexander Macfarren  
(1813-1887)



In closing I would like to echo several important points made by Nicholas Temperley, one of the few recent proponents of Victorian musical studies. In the opening essay of his book *The Lost Chord*, Temperley points out that our preoccupation with nineteenth-century "music of genius," as he terms it, and our insistence on the critical evaluation of a work's quality always within that narrow frame of reference, have steered us away from a rich area of inquiry where Victorian music is concerned. Nineteenth-century England in fact had a vital musical life, but a great part of its story has yet to be told because its compositions have been silenced. Temperley points out the difficulty of reviving Victorian music when he states:

When we try to revive and revalue neglected writers, thinkers, artists, and architects, the process can be easily initiated within the academic community; we can all read the books for ourselves, while paintings, drawings, and buildings are readily available to be looked at with fresh eyes. It is much more difficult to revive music; one needs performances and recordings. They cost money, time, and trouble, which few are willing to invest on untried bodies of music. This inherent difficulty has tended to perpetuate the judgments of previous generations. It is the final reason for the backwardness of musical scholarship in opening up the Victorian age. [Temperley, 14.](#)

In this presentation I've given you a small but representative sampling of English clarinet music written between 1800 and 1870. Examining this small component can help us bring into better focus the larger picture of Victorian musical life. In conclusion I would like to urge all of us to pay more attention to neglected repertoires such as this; not only can they provide us with a fresh body of material for our own teaching and concertizing, but they also contribute to a fuller understanding of the time and place that produced them. They are well worth the effort of reviving.

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Recorded musical examples:

1. [James Hook](#) (1746-1827), Concerto for Clarinet and Orchestra (1812), excerpt from the first movement (Allegro). Colin Lawson, clarinet; The Parley of Instruments, Peter Holman, Director. Hyperion CDA66896, 1997. Used with permission.  
Edition: Weinberger, 1983 (Paul Meecham and Jack Brymer, eds.)
2. [Cipriani Potter](#) (1792-1871), Sestette for winds, strings and piano (1836), excerpt from the second movement (Andante). Katherine Borst Jones, flute; Jane Ellsworth, clarinet; Kay Slocum, viola; William Conable, cello; Nikki Strader, bass; Sylvia Zarembo, piano. Recorded 24 February 1991, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA. Source: British Library, Add. MSS 31786 and 31787
3. [Joseph Williams](#) (1795-1875), "Bolero" from *Pensées fugitives* (publ. 1855). Jane Ellsworth, clarinet; Patrick O'Donnell, piano. Recorded 25 June 1999, Columbus, Ohio, USA. Source: Royal Academy of Music Library, 007117 and 007118
4. [Sir George Alexander Macfarren](#) (1813-1887), "Pack clouds away" (publ. 1867). Jill Pearson, soprano; Jane Ellsworth, clarinet; Patrick O'Donnell, piano. Recorded 25 June 1999, Columbus, Ohio, USA. Source: British Library, H.200.d(56.)

Figure 1: Possible English clarinetists for Hook's concerto

John Mahon (1746-1834)  
William Mahon (1753-1816)  
James Oliver (1758-1818)  
\*Edward Hopkins (1779-1860)  
George Hopkins (d. 1869)  
Thomas Lindsay Willman (1784-1840)  
[Back to text.](#)

Figure 2: "Pack clouds away," by Thomas Heywood (1570-1641); from *The Rape of Lucrece* (1608)

Pack, clouds, away, and welcome day,  
    With night we banish sorrow;  
Sweet air, blow soft, mount, lark, aloft  
    To give my love good-morrow!  
Wings from the wind, to please her mind,  
    Notes from the lark I'll borrow; Bird, prune thy wing, nightingale sing,  
    To give my love good-morrow!  
    To give my love good-morrow  
    Notes from them both I'll borrow,

Wake from the nest, robin-redbreast,  
    Sing, birds, in every furrow;  
And from each bill, let music shrill  
    Give my fair love good-morrow!  
Blackbird and thrush in every bush,  
    Stare, linnet, and cock-sparrow,  
You pretty elves, amongst yourselves  
    Sing my fair love good-morrow!  
    To give my love good-morrow  
    Sing, birds, in every furrow!

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For further reading

(A complete listing of this repertory, as well as a more comprehensive bibliography, can be found in the second item on this list.)

**Cudworth, Charles.** "The Vauxhall 'Lists'." *Galpin Society Journal* 20 (March 1967): 24-42.

**Ellsworth, Jane E.** "Clarinet Music by British Composers, 1800-1914: A Repertorial Survey." D.M.A. dissertation, The Ohio State University, 1991.

**Fuller Maitland, J.A.** *English Music in the XIXth Century*. New York: E.P. Dutton, 1902.

**McGairl, Pamela.** "The Vauxhall Jubilee, 1786." *Musical Times* 127 (November 1986): 611-615.

**Peter, Philip H.** "The Life and Work of Cipriani Potter (1792-1871)." Ph.D. dissertation, Northwestern University, 1972.

**Pirie, Peter.** *The English Musical Renaissance*. London: Victor Gollancz, 1979. [Back to text.](#)

**Rendall, F. Geoffrey.** "A Short Account of the Clarinet in England During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries." *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association*, 68th session (1941-42), 55-86.

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**Weston, Pamela.** *Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*. Denham Green, Middlesex: Published by the author, 1971.

**Weston, Pamela.** *More Clarinet Virtuosi of the Past*. London: Published by the author, 1977.

**Young, Percy.** *A History of British Music*. New York: Norton, 1967. [Back to text.](#)

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