

*Music in the Life of Willoughby Bertie, 4th Earl of Abingdon
(1740-99)*

Derek McCulloch
and members of Café Mozart
Roger Covey-Crump *tenor*
Jenny Thomas & Eva Caballero *flutes*
Ian Gammie *baß viol & guitar*

J.C. Bach Trio in G, 1st movt

The death of Johann Christian Bach, 'the London Bach' on New Year's Day 1782 marks a pivotal point in the *curriculum vitae* of Willoughby Bertie, 4th Earl of Abingdon (1740-99). For musicians versed in the music of the late 18th century "Rycote" is synonymous with "the Earl of Abingdon", as he is generally known: flautist, impresario, composer – and maverick politician. Above all it is his association with Joseph Haydn for which he is most specifically remembered.

What do we know of him – and what did he do before the eventful chain of events that followed the death of John Christian Bach?

Born on January 16th, 1740 on his mother's family seat in Gainsborough as the second son, he became heir to the earldom in 1745 when a fire on the estate in Rycote claimed his elder brother as a victim. He attended Westminster School under the brutal regime of William Markham, later Archbishop of York:

Great Prelate! Thou whose bloody birch / More wonders work'd than e'er in church

Thy sermons could perform

From the satirical biographical or autobiographical poem *Adieu to the Turf* 1778

In 1759 Willoughby matriculated at Magdalen College, Oxford. Again the aforequoted satirical poem shows him as less than impressed by his academic milieu:

When my old tutor talked of reason / I thought such nonsense out of season

And laughed in his dull face ...

Sometimes he said, and scratched his pate, / That no ideas were innate,

And blank was infant mind.

I could have granted his was empty; / But mine, ideas had in plenty

At birth to vice inclined ...

He took his M.A. in 1761, the year in which he succeeded to the title, taking up his seat in the House of Lords. For the next seven years much of his time was spent in Italy, Geneva and apparently the Netherlands:

To Holland next I bent my way:

But that foul spot, nor land nor sea / no pleasure could bestow;

In Italy disused to clothes, / I was disgusted by Dutch Beaux –

Breeches from head to toe.

From a political point of view his significant acquaintances were the exiled politician John Wilkes, with whom he visited Voltaire in Ferney, near Geneva. The Frenchman was not altogether impressed by him, describing him as: *English peer, bored out of his*

mind, travelling simply to get away from home. To charm away his sadness he had three hunting dogs, punch, and his mistress.

In terms of his musical development these years were significant. Probably doubling as his valet he had a flute teacher in Geneva, the flautist and composer Carl Gaspard Weiss, who introduced him to the French composer André-Ernest-Modeste Grétry (1741-1813).

The latter's *Mémoires*, published in Paris in 1789, have a fascinating reference to a "milord A ---", who had the habit of inviting important composers to write for him a flute concerto, only to have it rejected as not being to his taste:

It was then my turn, and I was asked to write a flute concerto. I replied that not knowing how well his Lordship played, I could only rely on speculation. I was invited to dinner; his Lordship played for a long time on the flute. A few days later I sent him a concerto which was actually more his work than mine, for I had pieced together the passages I had heard him improvising. He sent me a handsome present and offered me an annual allowance if I would send him more concertos, wherever he was. I accepted his offer.

A few years later the earl wrote to Grétry cancelling the arrangement on the grounds that he was no longer active with his flute, though this was clearly not the case, at least not in the long term.

In 1767, back in London, the earl wrote to Wilkes, still in exile, telling him of his 'tender engagement', and a year later he married Charlotte, daughter of the late Admiral Sir Peter Warren (1703-52), said to have been the richest commoner in Great Britain. Warren had made his fortune from the spoils of warfare at sea at a time when the victorious commander was allowed to claim a share of the booty from the defeated fleet. He owned large amounts of property in and around New York.

So much for the man. What of the earl's music – and why was the death of Johann Christian Bach so significant?

From the late 1760s until his death Bach had been the organiser of the "Bach-Abel" series, concerts that were the envy of Europe, where public professional concerts were not yet part of the musical landscape. On Bach's death the series was kept going for a further season under the directorship of his close friend and colleague Carl Friedrich Abel.

Both composers dedicated chamber trios and quartets to the Earl, though closer scrutiny establishes that the works in question had been published previously in Amsterdam and Frankfurt, but now appeared with new English frontispieces and dedications appended by the English publishers.

Abel, generally regarded as the last virtuoso viola da gamba player before the instrument became virtually extinct at the end of the 18th century, was a notorious

alcoholic. We have reports of his arriving to play so drunk that he could hardly stand. His instrument was tuned for him, he was sat down on stage and the curtain raised. After he had played like an angel, disguising totally the effects of the alcohol, the curtain was lowered and he was carried off stage, so that the audience remained oblivious to his true condition.

Putting on concerts can drive one to drink at times, but a permanent state of intoxication is not an asset to the delivery and financial governance of such events. In short, the one season with Abel in charge was enough to convince people that the time was come for a new impresario for the series, and this onerous distinction was placed on the shoulders of the earl, who is reported to have sunk £1600 of his own money into the enterprise. After two seasons he decided that enough was enough, complaining bitterly of the “ingratitude” and “illiberality” shown by those who had most benefited from his involvement.

On taking on the running of these concerts in 1783 the earl immediately wrote to Joseph Haydn in Vienna, offering him the artistic directorship of the series. After much prevarication, Haydn did finally come in 1791, but long after the earl had given up any active involvement in concert promotion – though he and Haydn were in frequent contact during the two visits made by the Austrian in 1791-2, 1794-95. They even jointly produced a collection of catches (= canons/rounds) and glees (= songs, not necessarily jolly) for three voices.

By giving up the organisation of concerts the earl had more time for another important pursuit: politics. Though frequently defined as a “Whig” (= Liberal), he was a fiercely independent politician, even publicly criticising the most prominent Liberal political thinker of his time, Edmund Burke. His passion was for the Constitution and the freedom of the individual; he abhorred all atavistic, tribal allegiance to any dogma or party; he supported the Americans in their refusal to pay taxes to the British Crown: *For taxation and representation are constitutionally inseparable, and America is not represented; of course, America cannot be taxed.* He supported our naval protection of Ireland, at a time when Parliament wished to make Ireland responsible for its own protection. Prophetically he emphasised that by allowing Ireland to arm and protect itself, it would pave the way in time for the Irish to use its arms against Britain. However, he did not – as reported in various potted histories and biographical encyclopaedias – support the French Revolution. The French were *“our old, natural, and ever to remain implacable enemies, the now Sans Culottes of France”*. He supported his argument by a slightly distorted quotation from none other than Voltaire: *They [=the people of France] are descended from monkeys and from wolves; for when they are not skipping and dancing like monkeys, they are ravenous and ferocious as wolves.*

It therefore comes as no surprise that a significant minority of his songs composed in the 1780s and 1790s reflect explicitly his political views, and his abhorrence of blind allegiances and dogma, rejecting, as he puts it in the third of the songs you are about to here: *All Jesuits, Genevian or Spanish*, meaning religious bigots and

fundamentalists, Catholic or Protestant. In the first song he clearly refers to the obligation of the monarch to uphold the freedoms safeguarded in theory by the Constitution. Elsewhere he had written: *The Crown of England and the King of England are distinguishable, and not synonymous terms. That Allegiance is due to the Crown, and through the Crown to the King.* [Political pamphlet published by the earl in Oxford in 1780].

The Political Rationalist

For modes of religion let zealots fall out,/ One thing to believe, another to doubt,
Neglect precious time in pursuit of a shade,/ While the substance is near and still offers its aid.
The best of all modes, I believe for my part,/ Is my grandmother's mode: a true honest heart.

What's Luther, John Calvin or Brahmin to me?/ About such sort of folk why should friends disagree?
The volumes they wrote we have some to maintain,/ But serve to mislead and disorder the brain.
From our old fashion mode let me never depart,/ The best of all modes is: A true honest heart.

I reverence the Church and our Sovereign respect,/ Till he aims to subvert what he's bound to protect.
His laws I'll obey and will deal him the mite/ required at my hand, with unfeigned delight.
Pray heaven protect him and fight on his part,/ For I firmly believe his a true honest heart.

Anon. 3/6 vv

The State Test or The Subversion of Parties¹

A Churchman and Dissenter/ Once had a great adventure, and grew exceeding hot.
They made a mighty pother and railed at one another,/ About they knew not what.

¹ Performed live. Available on CD *Haydn & The Earl of Abingdon*, Track 3; Naxos 8.570525, 2008

But when they came to cooling,/ And leave off Party fooling,/ they found they'd been to blame.

Like Christian and like brother they looked at one another,/ For each man felt the same.

The names of Whig and Tory/ Were but an idle story, a statesman's artful snare,

Invented to divide us, but with a view to ride us,/ And then the cash to share.

So reconciliation/ Succeeded disputation, both being of one mind:

To make their hearts the lighter, they made their cheeks the brighter,/ And in this health they joined.

Henry Carey. 4/6 vv

My favourite is perhaps *Utrum horum mavis, accipe*; this - like virtually all the earl's output - survives here in the Bodleian Library. It was long considered lost, but the Latin title, meaning: 'Take whichever of these you like best' was chopped off in the binding process, but it was possible to recognise the vestigial remains of the bottom of the letters on the second page. It is two songs, expressing inherently not dissimilar sentiments. On our *Café Mozart* recording² verses from each song are heard in alternation, one sung by soprano the other by our tenor. Take your pick! During the election campaign 1997 in a programme for BBC Radio 4 *Café Mozart* was not allowed to broadcast it, in case it be interpreted as against one party or another, when the Corporation was bound to uphold neutrality. The songs are both equally withering about all or either of the political parties. They may indeed have deterred people from voting at all ...

Utrum horum mavis, accipe

A merry land by this light, We laugh at our own undoing/ And labour with all our might for slavery and ruin.

² loc.cit., Track 1

New factions we daily raise, new maxims we're ever distilling, /

And him that today we praise, / Tomorrow's a rogue and a villain.

*A fig for these Tories, let's rout'em, Too long they have pestered the nation, / And we should be happy without'em
Then honesty would have its station, / And loyalty once again flourish, / the kingdom will soon have a blessing,
If faction and schism once perish, / For union will spread past expressing.*

The statesmen rail at each other, and tickle the mob with a story; / They make a most horrible pother

Of national interest and glory. Their hearts they are bitter as gall, / though their tongues they are sweeter than honey. They don't care a fig for us all / But only to finger our money.

*By setting with specious pretences the simple rude rabble a-madding, / to pull down the government's fences,
That they may in rapine be trading, / But thanks our bless'd stars they're detected,
The mists they did bind us with vanish, - and now we have wisely rejected / All Jesuits Genevian or Spanish.*

Too long they have had their own ends, In setting us one against t'other. / That brother hateth brother.

But we'll for the future be wise, grow sociable, honest and hearty.

We'll all their bad arts despise, / And laugh at the name of a Party.

Anon [Earl of Abingdon?]. 3/5 & 2/3 vv

With these political songs we have moved from "Music in the life of ..." to "Life in the music of Willoughby Bertie, 4th Earl of Abingdon". To some extent I do this reluctantly, because it distorts the picture. Of some 120 vocal or choral works extant, those with explicitly political content take up only about 5% of all his vocal compositions. In so doing we are distracted from a proper perception, which is that the earl was an extremely talented songwriter, with settings of a very wide selection of texts, covering love, life, nature - as instanced in this song, with its skilful imitation of the song of the nightingale:

*The Wakefull Nightingale*³

The wakefull nightingale that takes no rest,/ While little love inflames his breast;

All night how sadly he complains, // 'Twould make me think that love has pains.

O no, no, no, 'tis no such thing, / For love that makes him wakefull, makes him sing.

Anon. 1 v

Although largely conservative in his musical idiom, the earl's scores have some imaginative touches, including the use of engraved images. My favourite is the frontispiece to his "Twenty-One Vocal Pieces", depicting "a Turkish Pauper, well-known in the Metropolis of London, and the Original Words of his Prayer". Clearly an educated Turk, the prayer being in Italian: *Dio la benedica, Dio l'accompagna!*

The most infamous of his illustrated songs is a "Trio for Three Voices" depicting "Lord North in the Suds". North had taken the unpopular measure of taxing salt, tobacco and soap. The speech balloons of the caricature are sung in a dramatic recitative, two each by the three voices, ending with a Satanic assassin figure promising to "contract for him". The original bears no reference to the earl as the composer, but it has long been attributed to him. No smoke without fire!

For taxing of Salt, Tobacco and Soap, some say that Lord North is deserving a Rope.

His Lordship you see is now in a Tub, while the Old woman lathers and gives him a scrub.

"Salt thr Scoundrel", "Damn that Fox", "Lather him, he has tax'd Soap", "Eyes out", "Hell confound him",

"I'll contract for him". For taxing of Salt etc ...

Anon

The most spectacular illustrated composition is a multimedia work, in concept centuries ahead of his time. Written for the Bluestocking Club, founded in the 1750s

³ Recording loc.cit., Track 17

to advance learning and intellectual dialogue among women, it is “A/ Representation of the Execution/ of/ MARY QUEEN OF SCOTS / in Seven Views / The Music Composed for and adapted to/ each view. The aim of “this historic Representation” is to bring together the “sister arts” of Music, Poetry and Painting”.

Three known portraits of the earl indicate his interest in the visual arts, and two of them in different ways remind us of aspects of his life and music. An unfinished portrait of the earl by Gainsborough – he died of cancer in 1788 – is in unrevealed private possession. There were, however, two further portraits for which the earl in 1792 commissioned the services of the prominent portrait painter John Francis Rigaud (1742-1810). At his express wish the only surviving painted portrait shows him “pleased and gay, returning from shooting, and bringing a great quantity of game”. Also depicted are the various members of his family, including his eldest daughter Charlotte playing the harp – an alternative in wealthy families in Britain to the piano or harpsichord. The Germans were more socially pragmatic and chose instead the classless guitar, as Café Mozart gladly does where no keyboard instrument is available. This portrait, too, is in private possession, its whereabouts known only to the London dealers P.D. Colnaghi & Co.

The other portrait, surviving only in an engraving made by Michele Benedetti (1745-1810), of which numerous copies were in circulation, has had historians guessing. The German scholar Otto Erich Deutsch divined that it depicted Mozart and Haydn. Others, based on copies identifying the main figure as ‘Willoughby Bertie, 4th Earl of

Abingdon', were left to guess who the second figure playing the theorbo might conceivably be. J.C. Bach, Haydn, Monzani - a close friend of the earl and his preferred publisher, and also a flautist - were the front runners. The artist's correspondence with his son reveals it all, and we were all wrong. The theorbo player is the earl's uncle Mr Collins, who just happened to be in the house at the time. The identity of the main figure "in the act of composing" is confirmed as Willoughby Bertie by the fact that the earl's first collection of "Six Songs and a Duet" (published by subscription ca 1788) had a full page copy of Benedetti's engraving on the inside cover.

Whereas the earl's compositions comprise predominantly songs, most of them, though not all - and not surprisingly - involving accompaniments with flutes. In addition to these vocal items there come two published collections of country dances, one for two flutes and a bass (ca1788), and a further collection (1789), both collections with added minuets involving fuller instrumentation (horns, oboes etc.). The latter collection is predominantly scored for two violins and a bass, with just two for the unusual scoring of flute, viola and a bass. In this collection, written "for the year 1789", possibly a New Year's Ball, virtually all of the pieces have titles relating to family members and friends, presumably those present at the event. Each country dance is followed in the score by dancing instructions: *"The 3 first Gent[lemen] lead round the 3 first Ladies. The Ladies do the same. The 1st Couple [Cu:] lead down the middle and cast off. Poussette.* Thus the instructions for *"Lady Caroline*

Mackenzies Frolick". The "poussette" was a feature of Scottish dances especially the Strathspey, used only in fast dances and normally with only two couples ...

The other collection of dances (plus three "Capricios") is characterised by their quirky, programmatic titles: *April Showers; Fops Alley; Hop Tops; The way to keep him to name but a few*. Of the three 'Capricios' (sic) *A cure for the Spleen* is surely the most quirky title of them all.

Fops Alley followed by *Hop Tops*⁴

No assessment of music in the life of the 4th Earl of Abingdon would be complete without discussing his relationship with Haydn, especially since there is in the process a link to Rycote.

We have heard already of the invitation sent to Haydn to direct the concert series when the earl took over the Bach-Abel concerts for the seasons 1783 and 1784. Sainsbury, in his *Dictionary of Musicians* (1824-7) suggests that it was the earl's withdrawal from the enterprise that caused the eight years prevarication before Haydn actually arrived. As an Austrian in the service of an influential aristocrat, he will never have had dealings with impresarios or concert promoters, a breed of men unknown in Vienna, where there was no dedicated venue for professional public concerts. But aristocrats he knew and understood. Consequently he initially prioritised appointments in London with "milords", as he described them.

⁴ Performed live. Loc.cit., Tracks 11&14 resp.

Despite the earl's disengagement from the concert promotion scene, the two men were in frequent contact during Haydn's two sojourns in London. There are several references to such meetings in the "Notebooks" that the composer wrote while he was here. One such reference must surely be about Rycote:

Lord Avington (Haydn invariably misspelt his name!) installed an organ in the church on his estate. When the Archbishop of the diocese heard of this (Haydn possibly confused the bishops' membership of the House of Lords with the status of 'Archbishop') he sent him a written reprimand, because in England one is not allowed to do such a thing without giving advance notice to the relevant authority. He replied saying 'The LORD hath given, and the LORD CAN TAKE IT AWAY AGAIN. This is very ambiguous BUT VERY GOOD.

What became of the organ we do not know, but the present owners have recently installed another in the wonderful free standing Chapel on the estate.

The association between the earl and Haydn was not only social, but also musical. Together they published a collection of "*Twelve Sentimental Catches and Glees*". The vocal lines were composed by the earl, with Haydn providing merely "The Accompaniments for the Harp or Pianoforte". When this collection was posthumously reprinted the primary composer's name was rather cruelly omitted from the title-page and the songs were ascribed solely to Haydn.

There are two further entries in Haydn's rather randomly written Notebooks that have direct bearing on the earl's musical output. The third of the 4 Notebooks gives the text of various poems. Headed "Love" is a poem beginning: *When I know that your heart is another's.*

This turns out to be the first stanza of a song "Platonick Love", set to music by the earl in his first published collection of songs. These came out before Haydn's arrival in London in 1791, and the strong implication must be that he knew, even admired, the earl's setting of the words. The earl's setting in fact has two stanzas, not just the one written down by Haydn.

*Platonick Love*⁵

When I know that your heart is another's,/ That our wishes can never agree,
That a flame in your bosom still burns,/ That never was kindled by me.
One should think that your friendship's soft balm,/ Unassisted by love's ardent sigh,
Might every disquietude calm,/ And wipe off the tear from my eye.

But still while you call me your friend,/ Whilst that blessing you freely impart,
I feel that my wishes don't end,/ I would still have a share of your heart.
Perhaps in your soul you may trace / Some soft intermediate degree,
'Tween friendship and love some fond space,/ Which, if so, may be given to me.

Anon. 2 vv

⁵ Performed live. Loc. cit., Track 20

A further aphoristic poem in the same Notebook turns out to have a significant relevance to the Earl of Abingdon. Entitled “The Ladies (sic) Looking Glass” the text reads:

Trust not too much to that enchanting face.

Beauty’s a charm, but soon that charm will pass

Apparently disconnected from that entry is another in the 4th Notebook:

On 14th November 1794 I rode with Lord Avingdon to Preston 26 miles from London, to visit Baronet Aston; he and his wife love music.

What possible connection can there be between those two entries?

For the trip to Preston near Hitchin – the large country house became a boarding school for girls in the early 19th century - Haydn wrote two trios for two flutes and a bass, one each for both aristocrats. The trio for the Earl of Abingdon is a single movement work comprising Variations on a given melody. The poem and the melody for the trio were written down by Haydn as a short song for voice and piano, surviving in manuscript in the *Nationalbibliothek* in Vienna. Scholars have voiced opinions as to the provenance of that melody, most agreeing that it is not by Haydn but more likely an English folksong. Robbins Landon suggests it might conceivably have been written by Haydn as a “hostess gift”.

Given the trio was written for the earl, and given Haydn was well aware that the earl was a composer of songs, was there not a possibility that the melody on which the trio is based, has its roots in a composition by the earl? The search for the earl's songs began – most of them surviving in copies here in the Bodleian Library. Sure enough, in the very last collection to be scrutinized, his “Twenty-One Vocal Pieces”, is to be found, in a different key and written as a “Catch” for three voices, a number entitled “*The Lady's Mirror*”. This is indeed the source of the melody in Haydn's Trio and the manuscript piano song in Vienna.

Haydn English Trio 2 [Hob.IV:2]⁶

The relationship between Haydn and the earl seems to have stalled shortly after the trip to Hitchin. Haydn was clearly failing to complete a setting of a massive Ode based on an appalling text presented to him by the earl, who had commissioned the composition. Fate took over.

It was the earl's custom to present the London press with transcriptions of his controversial speeches in the House of Lords. In June 1794 he delivered an extraordinary outburst against “*those locusts of the law, the Pettifogging Attornies of this country*”. He named a lawyer, one Thomas Sermon, who had allegedly swindled him. Alas, the transcript for the press did not enjoy the protection of parliamentary privilege, and he was summoned to appear before the King's Bench, the court in which libel and defamation cases were heard. At the trial in December the earl

⁶ Song & Trio performed live. Loc. cit., Track 18

defended himself – how, under the circumstances could he have used a lawyer? The judge, the famous Thomas Erskine, found his demeanour arrogant and contemptuous of the Court.

At a hearing in the following February the earl did humbly apologize to the Court. But nonetheless he was fined £100, sentenced to 3 months in the King's Bench Prison in Southwark, and bound to keep the peace.

One's sympathy is somewhat tempered by the fact that for those with the financial means – as indubitably the earl will have been – this was no ordinary prison. On payment one could serve one's sentence as a 'ruler' – someone who served his/her time in lodgings within three miles of the prison, observing the 'rules' of the prison, without incarceration in it.

We have no further evidence of contact between the two men. Haydn dedicated his second set of English Canzonettas ca 1795 to the earl's daughter Charlotte. He also took back with him to Vienna some of the earl's compositions. Haydn's "*Die Schöpfung//The Creation*" was first performed in 1798 in Vienna and shortly after in London, and many of those who feature in the Notebooks appear on the list of subscribers to the publication of the score. Not, however, Willoughby Bertie, 4th Earl of Abingdon.

In the light of what we have just heard, one of the earl's early songs serves as a metaphor of his life: A highly talented man, stifled in part by an alien establishment, later to be silenced by Court order. But one whose spirit seemed indomitable whatever the circumstances:

*Contentment or The HAPPY CAGE*⁷

Thou pretty little tiny thing,/ How canst thou skip about and sing,/ Within this narrow cage confined?
Thou that wast born to soar on high,/ to spread thy plumage to the wind,/ And carol in the vaulted sky.

Thy gentle eye no verdure meets,/ Thy social note no mate repeats,/ Yet thou doest neither mope nor pine:
But doubling still thy shortened way,/ Enjoyest the little that is thine,/ And happy seemest all the day.

Thou prettiest little choirister,/ Oh! Thou shalt be my monitor;/ Instructive is thy artless lay;
Like mine disastrous though my lot,/ - I'll learn from thee to murmur not,/ And smile upon my adverse day.

Anon (Earl of Abingdon?). 3/3 vv

The earl's obituaries in 1799 were telling. Lord Charlemont described him as '*a man of genius, but eccentric and irregular almost to madness.*' Touchingly his publisher Monzani and his former flute teacher Weiss both named sons 'Willoughby' after him. Most telling of all, however, is his self-assessment in the preface to the multimedia work we discussed earlier, where he refers to himself as one 'whose Wishes are, not to say WHO but WHAT he is. And so to Subscribe himself: *HOMO SUM ...*

⁷ Performed live. Loc. cit., Track 15