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# The Grand Leicester Musical Festival of 1827

## Patrick J. Boylan

Leicester's eighteenth to early nineteenth century record in promoting major musical festivals and similar events can at best be described as mixed. The eccentric and over-ambitious Rev. William Hanbury (1725-1778), Vicar of Church Langton, attempted to repeat his 1761 Church Langton Handel Festival in Leicester, though this was not a success, at least financially, and he switched to Nottingham for the reprise of his final Church Langton Festival in 1762. (1)

Much more successful was the 1774 charity event, centred on a performance of Handel's *Jephtha*, in St Martin's, Leicester, planned as a major fund-raising event to mark the third anniversary of the establishment of the Leicester Infirmary. This two day 'Music Meeting' also had a Handel theme, with Joah Bates, a noted organist and concert organiser, his patron the Earl of Sandwich, together with other major national musical figures taking part. The four-and-a-half year old William Gardiner (1770 – 1853) still had a vivid memory of this remarkable performance 64 years later when he wrote his *Music and Friends*, reporting that the Infirmary Fourth Anniversary *was the largest assemblage of musicians that had ever taken place in the country* [sic - though presumably this was a misprint for county]. Unfortunately, though a considerable musical success which influenced the national celebration in Westminster Abbey to mark the centenary of Handel's birth later that decade, it was a financial disaster for the Infirmary, which was left with a £400 loss (over £42,000 at current prices). (2)

After this it was perhaps not surprising that for the next two generations there was great reluctance to attempt anything similar, though Leicester's musical reputation and standards improved very considerably, particularly through the first quarter of the nineteenth century. Increasing numbers of competent musicians became established in Leicester as instrumental performers and teachers, while the amateur music scene also expanded greatly. The leading amateur, the stocking manufacturer William Gardiner, became a well-known international figure, noted not only for his own compositions and arrangements, but also as the person who first introduced Beethoven's chamber music to Britain, and he became a friend or at least an honoured acquaintance of many of the most eminent continental composers and performers of his time. Gardiner also established an increasingly well-respected choir at the Great Meeting, of which he was a life-long member.

It was through Gardiner's reputation and practical help that a leading professor of violin, conducting and composition at the Paris Conservatoire, the strongly *Bonapartiste* Charles Guynemer, came to Leicester in 1814 and settled here as a refugee from the restored French monarchy. Among other things Guynemer quickly took charge of Leicester's emerging programme of concerts in the (Old) Assembly Room and raised these to a quite different level, and also re-established the Roman Catholic choral tradition in the town with the opening of Leicester's first post-Reformation Catholic Church in Wellington Street (now incorporated into the Holy Cross Priory, New Walk).

As the growing number of regional and local newspapers became more widely circulated across the country, Leicester became increasingly aware of the number of musical festivals being held in cities and other county towns across England, and there was a feeling that Leicester was being left behind. In 1826 the Infirmary Managers were approached by a number of local professional and amateur musicians suggesting a Musical Festival should again be mounted in Leicester, with the aim of raising funds for the Infirmary while at the same time providing a great cultural boost for the town's population and wider reputation. The Managers were supportive in principle, and appointed a special Festival Committee of Management to investigate this, and if practicable to carry the project through. This was to be chaired by John Mansfield, the Chairman of the Infirmary's Finance Committee, who was a partner in a leading local bank and a former M.P. for the Borough, with William Gardiner as another leading member of the Subcommittee. (3)

Much of the planning and implementation was immediately entrusted to Gardiner, beginning with a study of the practicability in terms of venues, on the basis that the Festival should include daytime performances of sacred music supported by a large choir and orchestra, and evening celebrity concerts. Gardiner reported back that he had considered all five main churches and four other possible buildings. Out of these he proposed that St Margaret's Church was both the largest building and had the best acoustics. A choir and orchestra totalling 200 or more, plus the soloists, could be seated under the tower for the three morning events, but a lot of additional seating for the audience would be required. He had therefore negotiated with the church on this and it had been agreed that the chancel could be filled with a raked gallery seating 500 in

addition to the seating for a further 200 in the nave. For the concerts he recommended the New Assembly Rooms (now the City Rooms), with two evenings of concerts and a Grand Ball there on the final evening.

Gardiner's recommendations were quickly accepted and it was agreed to start planning for a Festival to be held the following year, in September 1827. Gardiner also started work recruiting and then training a festival choir, aiming for one of at least 100 voices. Later he was to add to this, responsibility for the recruitment and organising of an orchestra of a similar size. Others on the Committee began approaching the nobility and leading gentry of the county and beyond seeking patrons for the Festival, almost all of whom readily accepted. Only the Bishop of Lichfield declined, offering his best wishes but saying that he considered that he could only support charitable efforts in his own diocese.

Other important administrative efforts included addressing the problem of accommodation and meals for out-of-town performers and audience. The three traditional coaching inns had nowhere near enough accommodation, though they could between them provide 'ordinaries' (set meals) for non-residents. The Festival Committee therefore set up an office which recruited large numbers of local residents willing to take in paying guests – for up to a week including main rehearsals for the performers and for three or four nights for members of the audience. Other planning work included extensive regional and even national publicity, and more mundane but very necessary measures such as the printing of posters, notices and programmes, and creating one-way systems for carriages in the streets around the venues for the dropping off and picking up of those attending, together with parking areas for the estimated hundred or more private carriages and coaches. Prices were also fixed as follows: *Tuesday morning 'Cathedral Service' in St Margaret's*: Chancel gallery seating: 10 shillings, Rest of the Church: 5 shillings; *Wednesday and Thursday morning Concerts of Sacred Music in St Margaret's*: Chancel gallery seating (each day): £1, Rest of the Church (each day): 10 shillings; *Two Concerts and Ball in New Assembly Rooms*: Each evening: 15 shillings. (Programmes were an additional 6d. for each event.). These prices were all very high in relation to the prices of the time: the £1 per performance for the chancel gallery on the Wednesday and Thursday mornings would be the equivalent of two or three weeks wages for a typical Leicester resident, and at least £75 at present-day values.

William Gardiner also took charge of developing the musical programme and engaging both the principal vocal and instrumental soloists and the additional orchestral players needed, by both correspondence and personal visits and meetings, particularly to London. By early August 1827 both the principal performers and the programme for all

events seemed to be settled, and Gardiner's choir was well-established and trained. However, there was an unexpected last-minute crisis when two of the three principal soprano soloists became unavailable, one because of illness and the other due to a very recent bereavement. One replacement was quickly found: the Italian-born French operatic soprano Rosalbina Caradori, living and working in London and married to E. T. Allen, Secretary of the King's Theatre.

Then it became known that at the beginning of September, the most famous soprano in the world, Giuditta Pasta, would be passing through the Midlands on her way to London from engagements in Dublin. Enquiries were quickly made and it was reported to the Festival Committee that Pasta would in principle sing in the Leicester Festival, but required a fee of £300 – an unheard of amount for just two performances. (4) The Committee decided that this was impossible: the budget would only stand £100, and even that could be a problem since it was far more than most of those already engaged were to receive, often for much more work. Earl Howe, a member of the Committee, was still strongly in favour of meeting Pasta's terms, and offered to make a personal donation of £100 towards her fee, and on that basis she was engaged. Following rapid typesetting changes, the programmes were printed in late August, and the advertising was also changed accordingly.

The final numbers of performers recorded were: Sopranos 53, Altos 32, Tenors 47, Basses 56, Orchestra:100, a total of 288. It is not possible here to introduce all of the starry line-up of over two dozen outstanding principal musical performers engaged for the Leicester Festival, but the following nine are both of special note individually and also indicative of the quality of the overall list:

### Singers

#### **Giuditta Pasta (Saronno, Italy, 1797 – Como, Italy, 1865)**

Pasta was the finest operatic soprano of the first half of the nineteenth century. After studies in Milan, she made her professional debut there in 1816 in the world première of Scapa's *Le tre Eleonore*, soon to be followed by her Paris debut as Elvira in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and the 'breeches' role of Romeo in Niccolò Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo* - both of which were to become among her most famous and popular roles. By the time of her 1821-22 season in Paris her voice was fully developed in terms of range, from the contralto low A to high C, and dramatic effect. Though always described as a soprano Pasta frequently sang what are nowadays regarded as major mezzo-soprano roles. Between 1824 and her retirement in 1837 she performed regularly in opera seasons in Milan, Paris, London and Naples. Among many other successes she created some of opera's most famous *bel canto* roles, including the title roles in Donizetti's *Anna Bolena* in 1830, and Bellini's *Norma* in 1831, in the same year creating the role of Amina in Bellini's *La sonnambula*.

#### **John Braham (c. 1774, London – 1856, London)**

Braham was the greatest tenor in the world of the first half of the nineteenth century, and probably the finest English tenor of all time, appearing in opera, oratorios and on the concert platform. He was of Jewish origin and as a boy he was a *meshorrrer* (descant

singer) at the London Great Synagogue, under its German-born *Hazzan* (cantor and musical director) Myer Lyon, who was also a leading operatic tenor at Covent Garden under the name *Micheale Leoni*. Braham first sang at Covent Garden as a boy soprano at the age of about thirteen in Leoni's 1787 benefit concert, astonishingly singing, apparently to great effect, one of the most challenging soprano arias of the eighteenth century: 'The soldier tir'd of war's alarms' from Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes*. (Braham's final performance at Covent Garden was an unprecedented 65 years later.) After his voice broke Braham studied in Bath from 1794 to 1796 with the former Sistine Chapel castrato (male soprano) Venanzio Rauzzini (1746 – 1810) who had retired there after a very successful operatic career across Europe. Braham's debut as a tenor was at the opening concert of the 1794 season at Bath. Very soon Braham was established as the leading tenor of his generation in opera, oratorio and concerts in London, and soon also across other leading European cities. In London for example he sang the title role in *Idomeneo*, the first Mozart opera to be performed in full in England, and he was the first English Florestan in the earlier *Leonore* version of Beethoven's *Fidelio*. By the time of the 1827 Leicester Festival, Braham was at the height of his powers and his fame. His outstanding success in singing the role of Max in the London première of Weber's *Der Freischütz* at Covent Garden in 1824 led to Weber writing for him the role of Sir Huon in his *Oberon*, first performed by Braham at Covent Garden in 1826. Soon afterwards he was the tenor soloist in the Mozart *Requiem* sung during Weber's June 1826 funeral service in London. Braham continued to perform, in his final years often singing baritone roles, through to his final appearance at Covent Garden as Rossini's *William Tell* in March 1852, when he was probably aged 78 years old. He died in London in 1856.



Giuditta Pasta, John Braham and Elizabeth Austin - three of the leading singers at the Leicester Music festival of 1827.

**Elizabeth Austin (1798, Leicester – 1875, London)**

The personal details of the soprano 'Mrs. Austin', as she was always known on the stage, have long been an enigma in opera and wider theatre history. She quickly gained recognition throughout the United Kingdom following her first opera season in Dublin in 1820-21, followed by six years of national and international fame in London. From late 1827 to 1837 she was in America, and is recognised as America's first international operatic *prima donna*. There are abundant contemporary sources and more recent information and research about her between the early 1820s and 1837. However, all that has been known about her origins is that she was originally from Leicester, while she vanishes completely from the records after she left New York to return to England in 1837. It now seems clear that she deliberately obscured much of her biography from her birth date and name onwards, presumably because of her 'unconventional' private life. However, her remarkable life and career have at last been unscrambled and a full account for publication is now in preparation. (5)

In fact she was born Elizabeth Clarke in Leicester in June 1798 and was baptised a week later at the Leicester Great Meeting. In 1814, at the age of only 15 years 10 months she married John Austin of Leicester in St Margaret's Church, and from that date was always styled 'Mrs Austin'. (At the time the age of consent for marriage was 16 for a man but only 12 for a woman.) By this time she had almost certainly begun her voice training with William Gardiner, presumably through the choir of the Great Meeting which Gardiner directed at the time. Later that year she gave what seems to have been her first public performance. This was in a concert of sacred music in St Margaret's, Leicester, organised and conducted by Charles Guynemer, in which as Mrs Austin she sang 'Let the bright Seraphim' from *Sampson*, arguably the most challenging aria for any voice in any Handel oratorio, and an astonishing achievement for someone so young. She seems to have continued her training with Gardiner and is recorded as appearing in other concerts in the region over the next few years, and for some time she also studied in London and Paris. By about 1820 she was beginning to be recognised as a prodigious talent, with a voice ranging over three full octaves. Like Giuditta Pasta she could also sing what are nowadays generally regarded as mezzo-soprano roles, and which included some of Austin's favourites, perhaps above all Cinderella in Rossini's *La Cenerentola*, but unlike Pasta she could equally well sing the very highest coloratura soprano roles.

In 1821 she obtained a one year engagement as a 'company singer' (i.e. salaried repertory artist) with the Dublin opera house, and quickly gained very favourable recognition in a range of leading roles. Luck was also on her side in that in 1821 King George IV decided to pay an extended State Visit to Ireland following his coronation the previous year. He was accompanied by much of the

Court, and the King's progress gained considerable press coverage in England as well as Ireland. The young English soprano was quickly noticed during the King's visits to the theatre (to which he granted the title Theatre Royal) and in other press reports, and as a result she was offered a contract to join the Theatre Royal Drury Lane. Her London debut there in the autumn of 1822 could hardly have been more auspicious – singing the lead in Thomas Arne's comic opera *Love in a Village* with London's finest and most famous tenor, John Braham. More challenging roles quickly followed attracting further very favourable press coverage, including Thomas Arne's *Artaxerxes*, again with Braham, but this time it was of course Austin who sang 'The soldier tir'd of war's alarms' with which Braham had astonished Covent Garden as a boy soprano in 1787.

Over the next five London seasons she established herself as one of the leading singers in opera, oratorios and concerts in London, as well as abroad. It was particularly significant that she sang major roles with the Italian Opera Company in the King's Theatre (now Theatre Royal) Haymarket – which almost never engaged British singers. (Braham was probably the only other exception in that period.) And she also began to appear at the Theatre Royal Covent Garden. However, the 1827 Musical Festival seems to have been her first major engagement in her native town. Fairly soon after establishing herself on the London stage she began a life-long affair with Francis Henry Fitzhardinge Berkeley (1794 – 1870), the fourth son of the 9th Earl of Berkeley, who began to style himself variously as Austin's Manager, or sometimes Musical Director. (They had a daughter, Elizabeth Austin Jnr. in 1825, and a son, Francis Berkeley Jnr. in 1837.) Immediately after the Leicester Festival, Austin, Berkeley and their daughter left for America, where Austin had been engaged along with almost a dozen other leading European singers and musicians to establish a well-

financed new opera and stage company in Philadelphia that was intended to challenge New York, which had become the leading theatrical centre in the USA. In November 1827 her American career was launched with a very highly rated opening performance of the new company at the Chestnut Street Theatre, Philadelphia. However, the generous terms of her contract allowed her both to take other opera, oratorio and concert engagements, and even to mount her own performances and productions in the Theatre as 'benefits' from which she would take all the profits. Consequently, within less than two months, she was appearing as a star guest in opera productions at the Park Theatre, New York, America's leading opera house.

Austin very quickly established herself as America's leading and best-loved operatic *prima donna*, and over the next six years, while always staying loyal to her Philadelphia contract terms, she gave some hundreds of performances in many dozens of roles across America, not just in New York where she remained very popular throughout her time in America, but also from New Orleans in the south to Montreal in the north. A versatile performer, greatly admired also for her dancing (but not 'the shortness of her petticoats' in stuffy Providence, Rhode Island!), she also appeared from time to time in stage plays, particularly Shakespeare: her Ariel in *The Tempest* being particularly admired. However, the bulk of her work in America was on the operatic stage, through which she helped to introduce to America not just the established English and Continental eighteenth and early nineteenth century repertoire, but also major operas of contemporary *bel canto* composers such as Rossini, Bellini and Donizetti, and the newer generation of English composers such as Henry Bishop.

Austin left New York for England in 1837 and according to all the major reference books and research studies simply vanished without trace and was never heard of again. However, the new biographical study in preparation referred to has solved the long-standing mystery of her later life, not just her birth and early years. In fact on returning to London she (and her daughter) adopted Berkeley's surname as she retired from the stage a wealthy woman in her own right (describing herself as 'of independent means' in the 1841 UK Census). In 1838 Berkeley was elected as a M.P. for Bristol and held the seat until his death 22 years later. The couple and the two children lived a more than comfortable life in a fine large house of 1838-39 by Matthew Wyatt in Victoria Square, Westminster (which still exists and is graded II\*). Following the death of John Austin (probably in the Paris cholera epidemic in 1848) Austin and Berkeley were at last free to marry, which they did extremely quietly in a small City of London church in 1856 – perhaps in order to regularise their situation at last before the 'society' wedding of their daughter some months later in 1857. Berkeley died in 1870, and Austin was then cared for by their son who lived close to her in south London, and she died in Lambeth in 1875, with few if anyone outside the immediate family realising that she was the opera star Elizabeth Austin, once famous on both sides of the Atlantic.

#### **Rosalbina Caradori (1800, Milan – 1865 Surbiton, England)**

Born of French and Russian parents in Milan, Caradori was a successful operatic soprano with a fairly light voice, apparently formally trained only by her mother, and she settled in London in 1822 after engagements in Germany and parts of France. Her London debut was as Zerlina in Mozart's *Don Giovanni* in the King's Theatre, and other Mozart roles early in her career included Vitellia in *Clemenza di Tito*. In 1824 she married E. T. Allan, Secretary and Manager of the King's Theatre, among other things singing Zerlina again the same year, and in 1826 she sang Juliet to Giuditta Pasta's Romeo in Zingarelli's *Giulietta e Romeo*, and then Rosina in Rossini's *Barber of Seville*. She was the soprano soloist

in the first English performance of Beethoven's Ninth (Choral) Symphony in 1826. However, in 1827 the King's Theatre stopped producing Italian opera, and after appearing in Festivals at Worcester and Leicester, Caradori returned to working mainly on the continent, particularly in Venice, where in 1830 she created the role of Juliet in Bellini's *I Capuleti e Montecchi*. Returning to England in 1834 she sang in Italian operas again for a time, but moved more towards oratorios and the concert stage. For example she was the soprano soloist in the first performance of *Elijah* under the composer, Felix Mendelssohn, in Birmingham. She retired in 1845 and died in Surbiton in 1865.



*Rosalbina Caradori and Guiseppe De Begnis.*

#### **Guiseppe De Begnis (1793, Lugo di Romagna, Italy–1849, N.Y.)**

De Begnis was one of the most famous baritone 'buffos' (singer of operatic comic roles) of the first half of the nineteenth century. He first studied and sang as a boy soprano from the age of seven until he was nearly fifteen when his voice broke. He studied acting, specialising in comedy roles, but then took singing lessons as a baritone. After his debut in Modena in 1813, engagements in many leading opera houses of northern and central Italy followed, including Bologna, Ferrara, Mantua, Milan and Rome. He quickly became a great favourite of Rossini, who in 1817 wrote the role of Prince Dandini in his *Cinderella* for De Begnis. After that he created the *buffo* roles in several more Rossini operas including *Turco in Italia*, *Mosé en Egitto*, and *Otello*, while Figaro in Rossini's *Barber of Seville* and various comic and more serious roles in Mozart operas (particularly *Così fan tutte* and *Don Giovanni*) were also very popular roles within his wide repertoire. Leaving Italy, he was the artistic director of the Italian Opera, London, from 1821 to 1827, the Bath Theatre for the 1823-24 season, and the Dublin Opera company from 1823–1837. In 1824 he was one of the extraordinary line up brought together in London by Rossini for the first performance of his *Morte di Lord Byron* tribute, with eight singers of international standing including Maria Malibran, Giuditta Pasta, De Begnis, and Rossini himself singing the tenor role of Apollo. In about 1845 he moved to New York singing in opera and concerts, but died of cholera in New York four years later.

#### **Instrumentalists**

#### **Thomas Greatorex (1758, Winfield, Derbyshire – 1831, London)**

Though born in Derbyshire, the organist and conductor Greatorex was brought up in Leicester from about the age of five. Noted also as an astronomer and mathematician, he studied with Benjamin Cooke, Organist of Westminster Abbey. His first appointment was as Organist at Carlisle Cathedral, but after four years he moved to Italy, where he became part of the entourage of the exiled Charles Edward Stuart, ('Bonnie Prince Charlie' or the 'Young Pretender'). When the Prince died in 1788 he left much of his music collection

to Greatorex, who returned to London the same year, where he succeeded Joah Bates as conductor of the continuing programme of 'Concerts of Ancient Music', intended to keep alive and promote the English musical tradition of the times of Handel and Purcell. Greatorex also began conducting major music festivals around the country. In 1819 he succeeded George Ebenezer Williams as Organist and Master of the Choristers of Westminster Abbey, holding the position to his death in 1831. He returned to Leicester as both organist and conductor to the 1827 Festival.



Thomas Greatorex. (Image Copyright, Dean and Chapter of Westminster.)

**Christoph Gottfried Kiesewetter (1777, Ansbach, Bavaria – 1827 London)**

Kiesewetter was one of the most celebrated virtuoso violinists of the early nineteenth century. Originally attached to the Hohenzollen dynasty's Royal Chapel in his native Ansbach (now spelled Ansbach), he became Concert Master (Leader) of the orchestras of the German cities of first Oldenberg and then Hannover. He was also well known as a soloist and a composer of works for the violin including concertos. He owned and played one of the most famous violins of all time – a c1723 Stradivarius which since his time has always been known as 'The Kiesewetter'. Kiesewetter moved to London in 1821 and immediately established himself as the country's leading solo and concerto violinist. However, by the time of his engagement for the 1827 Leicester Festival he was in very poor health. Though he completed his programme his condition on the concert platform was recognised as very distressing. (6) He moved on to the Norwich Festival – his next engagement – but the organisers were so alarmed at his condition that they paid him his full fee but sent him straight back home to London, where he died a few days later.

**Robert Lindley (1776, Rotherham – 1855, London)**

Lindley was regarded as the greatest English cellist of the first half of the nineteenth century. His first lessons were on the violin with his amateur cello player father at the age of five, progressing to the cello at the age of nine. In 1792 he was heard by the Anglo-Italian cellist James Cervetto who offered free tuition to Lindley. Moving to Brighton where his patron was based, Lindley was engaged by the Brighton Theatre where he often played for the Prince of Wales during his stays at his Royal Pavilion. In 1794 the eighteen year old was appointed principal violoncellist to London's Italian Opera at the King's Theatre and as well as serving as the principal cellist at virtually every important London concert over several decades. In 1795 he established a famous musical partnership with the double-bass player Domenico Dragonetti that lasted until Lindley's death fifty years later. On the formation of the Royal Academy of Music in 1822 Lindley was appointed one of the founding Professors and remained at the Academy to his retirement in 1851.

**Domenico Dragonetti (1763, Venice – 1846, London)**

The double bass virtuoso and composer Dragonetti spent the first 35 years of his life in his native Venice. As a young child he began teaching himself the guitar and double bass on instruments owned by his amateur musician father. At the age of twelve he began lessons with Bernini, the leading double bass teacher in Venice. In

1776 at the age of only thirteen Dragonetti was appointed principal double bass player at the Venice Opera Buffa, and in 1787 he joined the musicians of the Chapel of San Marco, Venice. He began playing solo pieces and also composing for the double bass and more widely for strings and the full orchestra. He played a key role in developing new approaches and techniques to the playing of the double bass, introducing these to, among others, Haydn and Beethoven. In 1845 he was in Bonn to play in the three day festival to mark the inauguration of the Beethoven monument there (at which William Gardiner of Leicester, the main organiser of the 1827 Leicester Festival, was one of the guest speakers). In 1794 he moved to London to play in the orchestra of the King's Theatre and remained there for the rest of his life, playing also with the Philharmonic Society of London and in many public concerts and private events. He established a long-standing partnership playing with the cellist Robert Lindley (see above). His own favourite double bass, the 1610 instrument by da Salo known as The Dragonetti is now in the Museum of St Mark's, Venice, but he also had a second 1610 da Salo, known as The Giant, now in the Victoria and Albert Museum. He had more than three dozen violins including three by Stradivarius. His 1706 Stradivarius, known as The Dragonetti Stradivarius, passed to the legendary virtuoso violinist Niccolò Paganini (1782 - 1840). Despite living in England for over fifty years, Dragonetti never learned English, but instead reportedly communicated in a mixture of Italian, French and the Venetian dialect (though apparently with some English phrases thrown in for good measure!).



Instrumentalists Robert Lindley (Watercolour by Alfred Edward Chalon, c1830, image Copyright The National Portrait Gallery, London), and Domenico Dragonetti.

**The last minute dispute between Elizabeth Austin and the Festival Committee**

Overcoming the crisis due to the last minute withdrawal of two of the soprano soloists by engaging Guiditta Pasta and Rosalbina Caradori as replacements, created a new crisis for the Festival in relation to promises claimed to have been already made to Elizabeth Austin. This issue will be examined in detail in the full account of her life and career now in preparation already referred to above. (7) However, at least a brief summary of the dispute is needed here. On 8th August Elizabeth Austin had sent a long letter to the Committee from London regarding her own role in the Festival following a visit she had received in London from William Gardiner to negotiate and discuss this. She had been offered only a £30 fee by Gardiner 'which I would have rejected from any other person as inadequate to my professional reputation'. However, the promise that 'Mr

Braham and the heads of the profession were included [in this] important undertaking I had a strong feeling that my early patron [i.e. Gardiner] had a right to demand any service [against] the pledged word of an honourable man.' She then continued setting out in detail, the various contributions to the programme that Austin had been promised by Gardiner and which she was now confirming she was agreeing to. (8)

However, on 24th August, less than two weeks before the start of the Festival, Austin sent a further letter from London to the Committee having seen the proposed final programme for the Festival. This showed that much of the most important music promised to her, and confirmed by her in her letter of 8th August, had instead been allocated to other singers. To take just one example she had stated in her 8th August letter that she and John Braham had sung to much acclaim in Paris, duets from Rossini's *Mosè en Egitto* and *Armida*, and she and Braham had originally been listed to sing these again in the Festival. However, the programme now listed Pasta and Caradori respectively, not Austin, to sing these with Braham. Austin was clearly highly incensed by what was being proposed. Though she does not seem to have said so publicly, she must have been very disappointed that the programme for her return to perform in her native town after more than a decade, now as a nationally, or indeed internationally, renowned opera star was being so reduced. However, in her 24th August letter Austin's language was firm though fairly restrained, key passages being: 'Gentlemen. Fully convinced that you will not sanction any steps which may be derogatory to my reputation or interest, I beg leave to address you on the change which has taken place in the Engagement for the approaching Festival.' After referring to examples of the changes she continued: 'I beg to claim my proper grade in the forthcoming depositions of the music as originally agreed.... Why the Committee should attempt to deprive me of that which was originally agreed?' (9)

The Festival Committee's official response to this does not seem to have survived, though the Infirmary archives contain an incomplete draft reply dated 27th August which is notable for several crossings out of whole sentences and restarts. The only explanation given for the drastic reduction in Austin's role in the Festival was to say without any more details that 'changes were due to the engagement of Mme Caradori'. (There was no mention at all of Giuditta Pasta.) So far as her fee for the Festival was concerned, one of the crossed out sentences in the draft seemed to have proposed to cut this from the little more than token £30 agreed with William Gardiner to only £25 – presumably on the grounds that she was going to be singing much less than originally planned! The final position of the Committee was to tell Austin that it was too late to make any changes: 'The Programme books are now printed and the Committee cannot make any alterations. (10) And that seems to have been the final answer. Austin seems to have accepted this and contributed to the Festival on the basis of the new

programme. She had clearly been treated in a cavalier way: one more example perhaps of the saying that that 'A prophet is not without honour, except in his own country, and his own town'. However, the entrepreneurial spirit which was going to mark much of Austin's future career in America was already showing. She quickly let it be known around the town and the Festival that at the end of the month she was leaving for America to help set up, with almost a dozen leading singers and musicians of the London stage, a major new international opera company in Philadelphia. Also, she negotiated with a no doubt delighted Manager of the Leicester Theatre to produce and star in two opera performances in the Theatre on Thursday 20th and Friday 21st September before leaving for America. These were advertised by the Theatre as her first (and in fact only ever) appearance in opera in her native town. The work chosen was Henry Bishop's *Guy Mannerling* based on the Walter Scott novel, a ballad opera that allowed some scope for principals such as Austin to add in other songs or arias. She chose to add one of her favourites 'The soldier tir'd of war's alarms' from Arne's *Artaxerxes*, which was received with resounding applause. Her disappointment over her treatment by the Festival must have been at least partly overcome by the fact that between the two opera performances she would have had a far bigger audience than in the two Festival concerts.

### **The Grand Musical Festival: the three morning Sacred Music programmes in St Margaret's Church**

#### **Tuesday 4th September**

Leicester was unlike many of the cities and towns establishing and running musical festivals in the early nineteenth century, such as York, Norwich or the Three Choirs Festival cities of Hereford, Worcester and Gloucester. Prior to the period of rapid growth and 'improvement' from the 1840s onwards, Leicester was still a relatively small market and industrial town with only limited cultural facilities, and perhaps above all, it had neither a cathedral nor the professional cathedral choir and associated musical resources that came with these. Also, with a growing nonconformist population, the Church of England choral tradition overall was perhaps not very familiar to many local people, even those interested in music. Consequently the Festival Committee decided that the opening event on the Tuesday morning should take the form of what it termed a 'Cathedral Service', giving the many local people in the audience (and indeed in the chorus and orchestra) a taste of the sort of choral service with which cathedral-based events such as the Three Choirs Festival opened their programmes.

Organised and led by the Vicar of St Margaret's, the Rev. T. Burnaby, the 'Cathedral Service' began with the Anthem 'Sing unto God, O ye Kingdoms of the Lord' from Ps. 68 – presumably Purcell's famous 1687 setting for bass soloist and chorus. This was followed by the 'Venite Adoremus' and three Psalms of the Day. After this there was a

performance of 'Cradock's Ode'. Joseph Cradock (1742 – 1826) of Gumley Hall had been one of the main driving forces behind the 1774 Festival in support of the Infirmary, and for the occasion he had written 'Ode to Charity. Written for the Benefit of the Leicester Infirmary', which was then set to music by William Boyce, Master of the King's Musick' of the day. William Gardiner who had heard this when attending the 1774 first performance as a child was an enthusiast for this, and perhaps it was also included in the 1827 programme as Cradock had died at the age of 84 the previous year.

Purcell's 1694 large-scale *Te Deum* for chorus and orchestra followed, with Elizabeth Austin as one of the soprano soloists. A Gregorian Chant setting of the 'Jubilate Deo' followed, after which John Braham led Martin Luther's famous hymn 'Nun Freut Euch' first published in 1535, in the translation 'Great God, what do I see and hear'. After the Sermon, preached by Reverend Erskine, Vicar of St Martin's, the Service finished with two large-scale choral pieces, 'Hallelujah to the Father' from Beethoven's dramatic oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives* of 1803, and 'a chorus from a Haydn mass arranged by William Gardiner' – perhaps a movement from his much publicised pastiche oratorio *Judith*?

### Wednesday 5th September

This took the form of a concert under the title 'A Grand Selection of Sacred Music', and opened with Austin singing 'Angels ever bright and fair' from Handel's 1750 oratorio *Theodora*. Next the chorus was given its head with the challenging and dramatic 'Rex tremendae' from the Mozart Requiem of 1791. There was then a quartet 'Benedictus' from an unstated Mozart Mass (perhaps most likely the *Coronation Mass in C* of 1779): the soloists were Giuditta Pasta, Mrs Knyvett, John Braham and Mr Phillips. Pasta then sang two solos. The first was the Preghiera (Prayer) 'Ciel pietosa, ciel clemente' from the 1798 opera *Inèz de Castro* by Niccolo Zingarelli (1752 – 1798) – one of the arias originally promised to Austin, and a recitative and aria 'Deh' parlante' from the 1786 Biblical opera *Il sacrificio d'Abramo* by the leading Italian operatic composer of the later eighteenth century Domenico Cimarosa (1749 – 1801). She was followed by Braham who sang the recitative and aria 'Deeper and deeper still...Waft her, Angels through the skies' from Handel's 1751 oratorio *Jephtha*, and by Miss Stephens singing 'Let the bright Seraphim' from Handel's *Sampson* of 1743 – another aria which Austin believed she had been promised. The chorus was then given its head again with Handel's celebratory seven part *Coronation Anthem no. 1 – Zadok the Priest* written for the Coronation of George II, and sung at every Coronation since. The 'Grand Selection' ended with the whole company performing the First Part of Joseph Haydn's *Creation* of 1798, covering the first four days of the creation as told in Genesis 1, and ending with the great chorus 'The Heavens are telling the Glory of God'.

### Thursday 6th September

The whole morning was (at least in principle) devoted to a complete performance of the 1741 *Messiah* of Handel. There was a special local interest in this since the libretto had been written for Handel by Charles Jennens of Gopsall Hall, Leicestershire, drawing on the King James Bible and the Prayer Book translation of the Psalms. The performance used the edition and orchestration of Mozart, intended for a much larger orchestra and choir than Handel's Baroque original. The decision to use the Mozart version was praised by the critic of London's *Morning Post* who argued that this should always be used in future. In fact this became much the most widely used setting for more or less the next century and a half until the movement for restoring the authentic much smaller scale original orchestration of Handel himself got under way from around the middle of the twentieth century. Following the Overture, Braham's famous declamatory, though very sensitive, style in the opening recitative 'Comfort ye my people', followed by the aria 'Every valley shall be exalted', must have got the performance off to a most memorable start. To Austin's great disappointment, especially having sung *Messiah* with Braham many times, the main soprano role was given to Rosalbina Caradori, though Austin was allowed to show her artistry once during the performance, singing the aria 'How beautiful are the feet'. As noted above the whole morning was due to be a complete performance of *Messiah*, but this apparently caused difficulties since Giuditta Pasta did not sing in English. So the *Messiah* was interrupted before the chorus 'Behold the Lamb of God' so that Pasta could be heard at least once during the morning, singing a 'Gracias agimus tibi' from the Gloria of an un-named Mass. Sarcastically but with every justification the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review* critic present wrote of this barbarism: 'such a monstrous anomaly requires no comment.'

### The Grand Musical Festival: the two evening Concerts in the New Assembly Rooms

Because the concert room was much smaller than St Margaret's Church no choral works were included in the concert programmes, and it seems likely that not least for space reasons a much reduced orchestra would have been used: a maximum of around forty players, mainly strings and woodwind, would probably have been sufficient though with a good horn section for the *Der Freischutz* overture in the Wednesday concert in particular. While the three Sacred Music mornings seem to have followed closely their printed programmes, press reports by knowledgeable specialist critics indicate that this was not always the case with the evening concerts, particularly the Tuesday evening one where unscheduled additional items seem to have made an almost intolerably long programme even longer. However, as there is in most cases insufficient detail to identify such additions, the following notes on the two evenings mainly follow the published Programme book for the relevant evening.

**Tuesday 4th September**

The evening began with the Overture to the 1803 French opera *Anacréon* by the Italian composer Luigi Cherubini (1760 – 1842), an orchestral piece that was highly praised in its period, most notably by Karl Maria von Weber and Hector Berlioz. The Italian *buffo* De Begnis followed with Figaro's already famous 'Largo al Factotum' from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, which was so well received that the audience demanded that he should sing the whole aria again as an encore. Austin then sang the *scena* 'Entendez vous' from a contemporary French opera of 1816 *Le Rossignol* (The Nightingale) by Louis Sebastian Lebrun (1764 – 1829). This was followed by the duet 'Ah! Se puoi così lasciarmi' from Rossini's *Mosè in Egitto* of 1818, sung by Caradori and Braham. After this there were string trios by Handel and Martini played in which Robert Lindley and Domenico Dragonetti were joined by the violinist and conductor Franz Cramer (1772 – 1848), Leader of the Festival Orchestra (and later Master of the King's Music from 1834). Pasta's solo aria followed: the mezzo-soprano cavatina 'Tu che accendi questo core' from Rossini's *Tancredi* of 1813. She and Braham then sang the duet originally promised to Austin 'Amor possenti' from Rossini's opera *Armida* written for the opening of the rebuilt Naples opera house in 1817. According to the reporter from London's *Evening Post* at this point Caradori inserted into the programme the 1821 song 'Should he upbraid' from Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* set by Henry Bishop (1785 – 1855). The first part of the evening ended with a 'Grand Finale' – the quintet 'Signori di fuori' which ends the second act of Mozart's *Marriage of Figaro*, though the allocation of parts to different singers does not seem to be recorded.

The second part of the evening opened with Beethoven's First Symphony, followed by one of the violin concertos of the Austrian composer Leopold Hofmann (1738 – 1793), an associate of Mozart, with Christoph Gottfried Kiesewetter as the soloist. It was reported that Kiesewetter was in such a poor state of health that two other musicians had to physically support him as he played and he was unable to continue with the rest of his planned Festival programme. Caradori returned to the platform and sang with the orchestra Zerlina's famous aria 'Batti, Batti' from Mozart's *Don Giovanni* (1787). The light-hearted mood continued with a duet by Braham and De Begnis from Rossini's *Barber of Seville*, but Pasta turned to the grandest of grand opera composers of the day, Giacomo Meyerbeer (1791 – 1864) for the next item in the programme. His 1824 'melodramma' *Il crociato in Egitto* (The Crusader in Egypt) had just gained him a Europe-wide reputation, and from this Pasta sang 'Ah! Come rapida'. This had in fact been written for the male lead Armando to be sung by the famous Italian castrato Giovanni Battista Velluti for its Venice première, and Velluti sang the role at the first London performances in 1825. However, Pasta sang the role as a mezzo-soprano in its first performances in Paris, also in 1825. In total contrast Braham followed, singing Walter Scott's 1820 'All the blue bonnets are over the Border' to the traditional Scottish air 'Oh dear mother'. Part II continued with the lively Overture

to Rossini's *La Gazza Ladra* (The Thieving Magpie), and ended with Mrs Knyvett singing the very popular 'Lo, hear the gentle lark' by Shakespeare, written for coloratura soprano by Henry Bishop (1786 – 1855) in his 1819 musical adaptation for the London stage of *The Comedy of Errors*.

**Wednesday 5th September**

Because of the degree of overcrowding in the Assembly Rooms during the first Concert the previous evening, thirty benches were brought in to provide seating for 200 more members of the audience. The programme opened with Haydn's Twelfth Symphony of 1763 in E flat Major, and with three movements: Allegro, Adagio and Finale – Presto, after which De Begnis sang another of his favourite Rossini *buffo* arias: 'Amor perche' from *Il Turco in Italia* (The Turk in Italy). Premiered in La Scala Milan in 1814, De Begnis sang the role of Selim, the Turk of the title) in the first London performances at Her Majesty's Theatre in May 1815. Pasta's contribution to the programme followed; the aria 'Ombra adorata' from *Romeo e Giullietta* of 1796, by the Italian opera composer Niccolò Zingarelli (1752 – 1837) and adapted from the 1530 Italian novella by Luigi da Porta (believed to be Shakespeare's main source for his *Romeo and Juliet*). The programme continued in a firmly contemporary vein with another symphonic work, the Overture to the 1821 opera *Der Freischutz* (The Marksman), the first important German romantic opera, by Karl Maria von Weber (1786 – 1826), which had had its London première at Covent Garden in 1824 with John Braham in the leading role of Max. This was followed by two very popular songs written and composed by the Irish poet Thomas Moore (1779 – 1852): 'The Harp that once through Tara's Halls' sung by Mrs Knyvett, and 'The Last Rose of Summer' sung by Rosalbina Caradori. Pasta and Caradori then sang a duet 'Dunque il mio' from Zingarelli's *Romeo e Giullietta*, with Pasta singing the *castrato* role of Romeo and Caradori the soprano role of Juliet. As the most celebrated performer in the Festival, John Braham was given the honour of the last solo item in the programme, singing the Scottish ballad 'Kelvin Grove', accompanying himself on the piano. Some commentators expressed surprise that something as trivial as this was even in the programme, but in fact Braham had a special relationship with the song. Originally a very dark narrative ballad of violence within a forced marriage: 'Oh the shearin's no for you, my bonnie lassie o', John Sim wrote the now familiar new words for Henry Bishop, who included the 'Let us haste to Kelvin Grove, bonnie lassie o' version in his 1819 ballad opera *Guy Mannering* based on the Scott novel, with Braham introducing the new version singing the title role of Mannering. He was followed by Lindley and Dragonetti, again joined by Cramer, playing some of the string trio sonatas of Arcangelo Corelli (1653 – 1713) for which they were famous. The evening ended with the whole ensemble singing 'God Save the King'.

**Postscript**

The Festival ended officially with a 'Grand Dress and Fancy Ball' in the Assembly Rooms on the Thursday evening

which apparently lasted through most of the night as well. However, the organisers must have realised that with such high ticket prices very few ordinary local residents would have been able to attend even a single Festival event, so on the Saturday evening a free open air event with fireworks was laid on. There must have been great relief (and much satisfaction) all round that all fears of a repeat of the financial disaster of the £400 loss on the Infirmary's 1774 Festival could be forgotten as the summary of the accounts became available. There had been high expenditure on the almost 290 performers (even the local amateurs within the chorus and orchestra were paid a minimum of ten shillings each), on the elaborate temporary seating galleries in the chancel of St Margaret's, and a considerable bill for printing and publicity, bringing the total payments up to £3,511.1s.4d. On the other hand ticket sales plus a substantial list of donations, both large and small, added up to total receipts of £4,661.18s.11d., giving a remarkable surplus of £1,150.17s.4d. for distribution between the Infirmary, the Lunatic Asylum and the Fever House of Recovery. (11) (At present-day prices, that equates to at least £87,000.) In addition to this the event must have had a significant financial effect on trade within the town due to the money spent on accommodation, meals, carriage hire etc. by the several hundred out-of-town visitors, whether audience or performers. As the London *Morning Post* critic reported summarising what he had found during his stay in Leicester: "The town is crowded". Local tradesmen also recognised the opportunity, with press and other advertisements for their 'jewellery and fancy goods', music and musical instruments, etc. On the other hand the Festival did not attract thieves and robbers as had been feared, and the two Bow Street Runners hired from London for the week had nothing to do.

The Festival was the most ambitious of its kind ever attempted in Leicester, and brought to the town much the greatest line-up of famous classical music stars ever in the history of the town (and modern city). There was some talk about making it a three-yearly event in the town like the Three Choirs Festival, but nothing came of this, though both celebrity concerts and more local music-making and promotion increased markedly over the following decades. The local concert and theatre facilities were soon improved, especially with the building of the New Hall on the corner of Belvoir Street and Wellington Street (1831) now part of the Leicester Adult Education College, and the Theatre Royal in Horsefair Street (1836), each offering much more seating and hence potential tickets sales. These were joined later by Thomas Cook's 1800 seat Temperance Hall in Granby Street (1853) and the Royal Opera House in Silver Street (1877). The 1827 Festival also had a significant effect on local music-making: for example the Festival choir trained by William Gardiner stayed together as the Leicester Choral Society, and while there is no direct link institutionally, there was perhaps an indirect link to the formation of the original Leicester Philharmonic Society three decades later. Also, at a time when Leicester was still trying to shake off the national image of scandal and corruption of its 1827

general election of a few months earlier, the great success of the Festival presented a very different image of the town which attracted much happier press and wider recognition – admiration even - across the country, with crowds of both music lovers as well as the merely curious having a once in a lifetime experience with a wealth of outstanding music and international stars rarely seen even in London.

#### References and Notes:

1. Patrick Boylan, 'Four Handel Oratorio Libretti published by John Gregory, Leicester, 1759–1774'. *Transactions of Leicestershire Archaeological and Historical Society*, 80 (2006), pp. 123-151.
2. William Gardiner, *Music and Friends; or, Pleasant Recollections of a Dilettante* (London: Longman, 1838, 2 vols.), vol. 1 pp. 3–8; Jonathan Wilshire, William Gardiner, *New Grove*, vol. 7, p. 164; L. M. Middleton, William Gardiner 1770–1853, *Oxford DNB*, vol. 21, pp. 47–48.
3. The whole process of developing and eventually running the Festival was recorded in considerable detail in the Infirmary Records, now in the Record Office for Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland (ROLLR): 13 D 54/14. These include Minutes of Meetings, copies of programmes and other printing, and correspondence (including letters accepting invitations to be patrons of the Festival). There is also a great deal of press coverage in both local and national newspapers (many now searchable through the British Newspaper Archive: <http://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk>). A particularly knowledgeable press reporter was that of London's *Morning Post*, which published 'Leicester Music Festival' reports in the Friday 7th September 1827 and Monday 10th September 1827 editions (page 3 in each case). The *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, 1827, pp. 193–197 had an extended review with a full list of performers, and there was also an anonymous book: *An account of the Grand Musical Festival, held at Leicester, September 4th, 5th, & 6th, 1827, with critical remarks on the Performers & Performances* (Leicester: A. Cockshaw & London: Hurst, Chance & Co., 1828). William Gardiner gives a fairly brief account in *Music and Friends* vol. 2 (1838), pp. 629–633. There is also a chapter on the Festival, drawing on the Minutes, programmes and newspaper reports in Max Wade Matthews: *Musical Leicester* (Wymeswold: Heart of Albion Press, 1998), pp. 57–75.
4. It was widely reported – usually with astonishment - in the English provincial newspapers that Pasta was in fact being engaged at a fee of £400, but the Minutes give the figure of £300.
5. Patrick Boylan, 'The elusive Elizabeth Austin of Leicester: America's first international operatic prima donna'. In preparation – for publication in 2015.
6. Gardiner, *Music and Friends* vol. 2, p.532.
7. See note 5 above.
8. Elizabeth Austin to the Festival Committee 8th August 1827, Infirmary Records, ROLLR: 13 D54/14/30.
9. Elizabeth Austin to the Festival Committee 24th August 1827, Elizabeth Austin to the Festival Committee 8th August 1827, Infirmary Records, ROLLR: 13 D54/14/30.
10. Draft of letter from the Festival Committee to Mrs Elizabeth Austin about the terms of her engagement, 27th August 1827, Infirmary Records, ROLLR: 13 D54/14/31.
11. Summarised on the cover of the volume of Festival Programmes, Infirmary Records, ROLLR: 13 D54/14/1.