

**NEWCASTLE'S MUSICAL HERITAGE**

**AN INTRODUCTION**

**By**

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### INTRODUCTION

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## A History of Music in Newcastle upon Tyne

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### INTRODUCTION

This book presents, for the first time, a comprehensive account of Newcastle's musical history. My original intention was to write an essay on the musical life of Newcastle during the Victorian era but that would have meant passing over Charles Avison. I decided, therefore, to begin at the beginning and take the mid nineteen fifties as an end date. In the circumstances it should be unnecessary to remind readers that all my references and comments, unless otherwise stated, are to musical activities in Newcastle prior to the nineteen fifties. .

Culture in its higher forms was never to the fore in Newcastle's rich history and in the past Newcastle was never perceived as a cultural town let alone a musical one, but behind its sooty industrial facade the region managed against all odds to build up an impressive musical culture, which suffered only as the 20th century progressed and by mid century it was all but forgotten. Newcastle was reborn in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century but in spite of its new and exciting image as one of Europe's leading cities its past musical heritage has remained buried and largely forgotten.

Newcastle and the North East Region has always been steeped in culture, culture in the sense of rituals and custom that seal the bond of membership in a community rather than the culture we associate with art and music. Growing up in the town in the nineteen forties I felt constantly frustrated but then there was a war on. After the war there were concerts at the City Hall by visiting orchestras, the odd ballet week at the Theatre Royal and a recital now and then but none of it was homegrown. I well remember a Sunday concert by the Northumberland Orchestral Society in March 1946, conducted by Arthur Milner, one time professor at the Newcastle Conservatoire, that opened with the Overture 'The Hebrides' by Mendelssohn played without trombones. Apparently they couldn't find any trombonists free that afternoon! Such was the state of affairs.

I used to wonder why other big industrial towns, such as Birmingham, Liverpool and Manchester, could support professional orchestras - orchestras they were proud of - when the best my home town could do was assemble an assortment of professional, semi-professional and amateur musicians into an ad-hoc symphony orchestra to give a once a year concert to a half empty hall. Little did I realise then that I was echoing the words of Ald. Ellis at a council meeting in 1896 when he said '*Let the council look for a single moment at what was being*

*done at Leeds, Birmingham and other places, where only first class concerts were provided, whereas in Newcastle, there had been the same second-rate class of concerts from year's end to year's end.'*

Many years later, when Newcastle developed a conscience about its historical heritage and there was a proliferation of books on all aspects of Newcastle's history appearing in Newcastle bookshops I hastened to buy them. But to my great disappointment they either completely ignored music or, where there was an entry in the index, the supporting text invariably comprised a few lines dedicated to Music Hall and the song 'Blaydon Races'. I began to think that Newcastle had no musical heritage and if it ever had it must have been lost on the road to Blaydon. Half a lifetime later I found myself still turning over the same question in my mind but by then, of course, the North East had changed. The Northern Sinfonia was getting more national and international exposure than Newcastle United and no one was greatly concerned about what had happened before. But I was, still, and came to the conclusion that the only way I was going to find the answer was to dig back in history and unearth the facts for myself.

I hastened to the local reference library and consulted 'The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians' Edition. 2001. There, under Newcastle upon Tyne, I found barely two columns giving a potted musical history of the town. The account concentrates mostly on the developments since 1958 with an assortment of unrelated historical facts interwoven into the text. To me it paints a sad picture of the town's musical heritage and leaves one with the impression that there is not much to talk about prior to the nineteen fifties. I turned to Birmingham and found twelve columns spread over seven pages of enthralling musical history. I then looked up Liverpool to find nine columns over five pages of music history. Even Bradford could boast two columns reflecting a continuous musical culture in the town. "What does it matter now anyway", I can here someone say. It doesn't matter for those who do not care but why should Newcastle not give full recognition to its musical past as it does to its industrial past and claim its place as one of the leading provincial musical towns of the 19<sup>th</sup> century long before it emerged supreme in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The trouble seems to be that it has fallen to historians to write up the town's history, which is as it should be, but historians seem not to be overly concerned with music matters, presumably on the basis that the history of the world would not be changed one iota if not a note of music had been written. The musicians, themselves, prefer to make music rather than write about it. This situation has led to the town's musical past being totally overlooked leading to the assumption, in most people's minds, that the town has none. The following story to some extent bears witness to this fact. Whilst browsing in the music section of a second hand book shop in Bournemouth I engaged in conversation with the owner and told him I was thinking of writing a book on Newcastle's musical history but would need to spend time in the city to research it. He showed interest and when, a few weeks later, I called-in at his shop again he told me that he had been discussing

my project with a professional man, an engineer from Newcastle, who was one of his customers. For what it was worth, the bookseller said, the engineer wished me luck but said I would be wasting my time and money because I wouldn't find anything. Newcastle has no musical history.

I was grateful for the engineer's comment, it confirmed that which I had long suspected and it renewed my determination to pursue the subject further. I was finally convinced that there was a need for a book on Newcastle's musical past if only to counter the widely held opinion that the town has no musical history to speak of. There will be those, of course, who are better informed and are well aware that Newcastle has had a thriving musical culture for almost half a century but pressed on the point I think many will be of the opinion that it all began back in 1958. I hope, therefore, by the end of this book to convince all those doubting engineers and other unbelievers that Newcastle has a rich and interesting musical past and in addition, enlighten the better informed, in that whilst the region's cultural flowering fifty years ago appeared to come out of nothing, it was in fact only another stage in a history that can be traced back over a thousand years, beginning somewhere around the 7<sup>th</sup> century.

## CHAPTER ONE

### EARLY HISTORY

Music in the form of song has probably existed in the north east corner of the country since the earliest times as a natural form of expression. Some languages lend themselves better to song than others and the varied pitch of North Country speech is undoubtedly one of them. Folk Song is by definition an anonymous art originated by simple folk without learning and yet it maintains the most perfect musical expression of a people's soul and commonly expresses a region's characteristics in a definite way. It has always been at the core of Northumberland's musical heritage and a powerful influence in the area. The Christian Church also made use of song very early in its history. This would have taken the form of communal prayer and responses in chant form and through time gave birth to the choral tradition, which is another form of musical expression close to the heart of the people in the North East. The first references to music in the north of the country come from the writings of the Reverend Bede. He was born in Northumbria in 673 and died in Jarrow in 735. He was a monk, a writer and a historian and although he did not compose music he wrote on its practice in the church during the sixth, seventh and early eighth centuries. His writings constitute some of the most important and informative evidence for liturgical music in the Anglo Saxon Church. These include '*De orthographia*', containing definitions of several musical terms and '*De arte metrica*,' which includes discussion of the definitions and differences between rhythm and metre. He also showed concern in his writings about his feared deterioration in church music through familiarity. We imagine that this music must have been fairly primitive but to its contemporaries it was probably very much alive and developing. Part-singing was being introduced and according to Giraldus Cambrensis the Northumbrians sang in two parts. There would also most certainly have been some form of instrumental music around but probably as accompaniment to song or dance only.

Vocal music has always been to the fore in England and by the Middle Ages songs and airs were being composed all over the country by persons from all walks of life and were sung constantly in lanes and streets. Even then Northumberland must have been a musical county and this is corroborated by the striking fact that in the old song books published in London and the south in Tudor and Stuart times, there often appears "set to an excellent north country tune" and this is not a reference to north of the border. By the 1600s great pleasure was taken by all classes in this form of native music. It was the custom

then even in the villages for musicians to wait on others for a small fee and an important branch of musical activity for some centuries was that of Waits. These were known as the Town's Waits and in Newcastle were dressed in three-cocked hats and blue cloaks. These municipal musicians strolled the streets at night playing on some instrument to mark the hours and wakening the chief citizens in the morning by music before their windows. They also provided music on civic occasions as they may well have done in Newcastle in 1633 when King Charles paid a visit to the city on his way to Edinburgh to be crowned King of Scotland and later, when they most certainly did for Oliver Cromwell. He was wined and dined as a guest of the city. *'The people received him with very great acknowledgements of love and he and his officers were sumptuously entertained by the mayor. While at dinner in the mayor's house the town's waits played outside on a little bridge over the Lort Burn near Sandhill.'* The Waits were an important branch of musical activity in England generally and continued in Newcastle until in the 1790s when *'amidst some modern, narrow, and gloomy schemes of economy, the company was discharged'*.

What effect the Reformation had on music in 17<sup>th</sup> century Newcastle is difficult to say but generally it is thought that by the time Charles II returned to the throne in 1660 musical England was in a morose state. On the other hand one can imagine that Cromwell was much less concerned about what was going on in the North East and we had after all entertained him well! Cromwell, himself, was very musical; he sang psalms after dinner, held musical gatherings, employed a keyboard tutor for his daughter, and a personal organist. Perhaps the most revealing aspect of Cromwell's musical side is to find that at the wedding of his daughter *'They had forty eight violins, and much mirth and frolics, besides mixt dancing'*. Musical expression was as much a part of life in Newcastle then as now, in the church, in the small select musical gatherings of the gentry and in the boisterous, bawdy music making of the illiterate masses. And behind the personality of each of these strands lay the common property of all. Since the Middle Ages music had sought to free itself from the restrictions of the church and there had emerged around the mid 16<sup>th</sup> century a new art form known as secular music. The term is not really very helpful for the purposes of definition because with vocal music much of it was written for domestic use and was unambiguously sacred. But then there was the question of social functions and circumstances of performance to consider as well as publication. Secular instrumental music had established itself somewhat earlier than vocal, around 1540, as a fully independent repertory and a self-sufficient art form weaned from its liturgical dependence.

Travelling musicians were largely responsible for bringing this music to the attention of the people, and by the seventeenth century the skill and virtuosity of these minstrels had reached a high standard. Although these purveyors of song and melody had not always been welcomed by everyone and the Church had tended towards the view that minstrels were purveyors of filth and sin and who speaks filth is the servant of Lucifer. The power of music as an incitement to lust

was commonplace in medieval thought. This period witnessed the development of instrumental music and saw the rise of the lute virtuoso, who in turn gave inspiration to other composer performers. Many of these came from the Continent and it resulted in an influx of foreign musicians engaged for their skill in performance. The early flowerings of Italian opera also began to have an influence on English music particularly solo song. The first great flowering of English music was brought to an end with the death of Purcell in 1695 and the foreign domination of musical England was to begin with the age of Handel, fifteen years later in 1710. All of this was to have an effect on musical life in Newcastle but for the time being the main formal musical activities remained with the church as it had done since the Middle Ages. In Newcastle it lay in the hands of such leading musicians of the day, whose names are inscribed in gold lettering on the entrance to the organ loft in St Nicholas Cathedral together with the date they took up their organistship).

Weddell	(1508)
Thos Tunstall	(1631)
John Nichols	(1636)
William Hauzwell	(1677)
Thomas Palmer	(1681)
Samual Nichols	(1687)
Thomas Powell	(1719)

Such compositions of theirs that have come down to us through history are the subject of further research. Although music publishing began in the 1500s most early music of this nature is lost to us today. Few composers of any distinction have remained associated with a particular locality and achieved any sort of immortality through their music. However, there was one exception, a Newcastle composer who turned his back on London and in spite of it became widely known in English music circles in his own lifetime as much for his musical compositions as for his musical criticisms. Today his name is frequently spoken of in the same breath as the leading musicians of his time although he was never one of the inner circle. His name was Charles Avison.

## CHAPTER TWO

### CHARLES AVISON

Charles Avison is unquestionably the single most important figure in Newcastle's musical history and the city is justly proud of him. Today he has a society bearing his name, which is dedicated to restoring his music and his rightful place as a Georgian musician. The man and his reputation has, if anything, grown over the years and today there are many potted biographies and articles about him, but as so little is known about his early life, much of what has been written is speculation and can be neither proved nor disproved. The most reliable of them in my opinion is that written by Arthur Milner and published in *The Musical Times*, in two parts, over January and February 1954. However, the picture that emerges from all that has been written about Avison is of a man greatly respected and admired for his personal qualities, whatever faults and deficiencies he may have otherwise had, and I think this would have greatly pleased Charley Avison from Nolte Market, and no doubt it is the way he would have wished posterity to remember him.

Charles Avison was the third son of Richard and Anne Avison, born in 1709. The parish register of St John's church, Newcastle, records his baptism on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1709. He would have been taught the rudiments of music at home as both his parents were musical, his father being one of the Town Waits. Charles would have received some formal education at one of the local Free schools in the district, thereafter he probably self educated himself in the local book shops, which he frequented and later gained his poise and position in local society by his association with men of letters and through his influential pupils who introduced him to an ever widening social circle. One of these was Mrs Ord, a bluestocking and typical of those wealthy learned women of the time who, opened their homes (salons) to artists, men of letters and musicians and provided a select forum in which they were able to converse with each other. At some time in his early twenties Avison went to London and for a spell was a pupil of Geminiani, Italian violinist, theorist, teacher and conductor (whom young Avison may, or may not, have accompanied on one of his trips to Italy) and through him was greatly influenced by the Italian style, which had infiltrated English music of the time. A letter signed 'Marcellinus' in the *Newcastle Journal* on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1759 indicates that Avison was offered the organist's post at York Minster in 1734 but refused it and between 1733 and 1740 was, on Geminiani's recommendation, offered two organist posts in Dublin, which he also turned down. In addition to these he further refused offers of a teaching post in Edinburgh with participation in the Musical Society there and the organist

vacancy at the Charterhouse in London. He chose instead to return to Newcastle and take up a position as parish organist at St John's Church. In that same year, 1736, when only 26 years old he was offered the post of organist at St Nicholas' Parish Church – now Newcastle Cathedral - at a salary of £40 a year, which he accepted. He was to remain in the post until his death thirty years later.

Soon after his return to Newcastle, on 15<sup>th</sup> January 1737, he married Catherine Reynolds, a seamstress, and they had at least four children and probably nine, most of them dying in childhood. Two of his sons succeeded him as organist at St Nicholas'; Edward in 1770 and Charles, jnr., in 1789. The appointment of Charles Avison, senior, to the city's parish church made him at an early age the leading musician in the district. He developed close musical links with, amongst others, the Durham musician John Garth, (1722 –1810), who assisted him in some of his musical compositions and in arranging concerts. Other active musicians at the time included, Thomas Ebdon (1738 –1811), also from Durham and Matthias Hawdon from Newcastle (1732 –1789). There appears to have been created about this time, for a brief period, a North East Vogue in musical composition style largely due to Avison's influence but it had no known effect outside the region.

In 1738 Charles Avison became head of the Newcastle Music Society (it had been founded just before he came back to the town from London) and was also director of the Community Concert series. He was active in organising the first public subscription concerts to he held in Newcastle, which took place in the Groat Market during the 1730s and 1740s. This was probably an idea Avison had picked up in London where subscription concerts had begun almost a century earlier. At these concerts, it is said, he introduced the works of many new and important composers to the public, including those of Handel and Geminiani, whom he considered superior to Handel. He no doubt also used these occasions to showcase his own compositions. It seems that the young Avison from the industrial north was greatly impressed by the colourful, larger than life personality of Geminiani, who has been described as a romantic born before his time, washed up in London on the tidal wave of Continental musicians in 1714, after which he quickly established himself as a highly paid and much lionized society violin teacher. Although Avison may have been impressed by his master he was obviously not sufficiently influenced by him, or able to comprehend, the opportunities Geminiani was bringing his way, which would have launched him into leading musical circles in London and helped establish him on the road to a successful and possibly lucrative career.

Richard Welford in his 'Men of Mark Twixt Tyne and Tweed', published in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, gives us an interesting insight into Avison's concerts, which is worth quoting in full.

*'As soon as he had settled down to his duties at St Nicholas, Mr Avison took the lead in organising a series of subscription concerts – the first that had been*

*given in Newcastle. They were held in the Assembly Room in the Groat Market, commencing soon after Michaelmas, 1736 and continuing through the winter. The following year there was a concert in the Race Week, another on the Wednesday in the Assize Week (the latter for Mr Avison's benefit), and the subscription concerts were repeated. In 1738, he had again a benefit concert in the Assize Week and took upon himself the sole liability of the subscription concerts, changing the hour of commencement from 9 P.M. to 6 P.M. and charging 2s 6p for a ticket, which admitted one gentleman or two ladies to the whole series. Next year the concerts were renewed with increased success. On 29<sup>th</sup> November, as we learn from a local record, "there was a grand performance of three celebrated pieces of vocal and instrumental music – viz., 'To Arms' and 'Britons, Strike Home', the 'Oratorio of Saul' and the 'Masque of Acis'. There were twenty-six instrumental performers, and the proper number of voices from Durham. The gentlemen and ladies joined in the chorus, and all present saluted the performers with loud peals of claps, acknowledging a general satisfaction. There was the greatest audience that ever was known on a like occasion in Newcastle.'*

These concerts continued under the management of Charles Avison until his death, and afterwards by his sons.

We have little idea of what sort of person the young Avison was and I am not the first person to be at a total loss to understand why he chose to give up the opportunity of a career at the centre of music in the capital and instead become a humble parish church organist in Newcastle. The portrait of him in the Laing Art Gallery – painted when he was 41 provides food for thought. The high domed forehead and large sensitive eyes point to a man of reflective, caring and sincere disposition. The receding hairline and the set of the features give the impression of intelligence, quiet determination with perhaps just a hint of artistic arrogance. It was said that Avison had the basic characteristics of a north countryman; shrewdness, common sense and outspokenness tempered by a refreshing sense of humour. Georgian London, quite obviously, did not appeal to him. Perhaps his small town upbringing, his limited education and his north country dialect left him feeling like a fish out of water in the artificial, insincere, hot house atmosphere that, as a musician, he would certainly have had to involve himself in if he wanted to progress in the capital, (The great George Stephenson suffered a similar fate a century later and was asked by one member of the Parliamentary Committee he was addressing, "Are you a foreigner?") Did Avison perhaps foresee the advantages of accepting the appointment as organist at St Johns' as a golden opportunity for him to indulge his career as a musician in a 'plum' post without the struggles, the competition and attendant hardships of having to establish himself in London or some unfamiliar provincial town? Or was it, as I prefer to think, that strongest of all reasons that brought him back; the love of a woman. The woman he married soon after his return and lived happily with for the remainder of his life. His contemporaries considered him to be a man of energy and enthusiasm and a person of considerable charm and general culture. Avison

may have lacked that vital spark of ambition but one thing is certain and that is music was his passion. In a letter that appeared in the Newcastle Journal after his death it was stated that *'had music been less his passion and more his business his time would have been more profitably employed'*

Avison is often referred to today as the foremost English concerto composer of his time. It is an epithet that seems to have stuck to him. He composed sixty concerti grossi in the style of Geminiani as well as arranging another set of thirteen from Domenico Scarlatti sonatas. His further output comprises a collection of sonatas for harpsichord and strings in the style of Rameau and odd anthems and hymns. Further arrangements include a set of 50 Psalms set to music by Benedetto Marcello, on which he collaborated with John Garth, the Durham musician. There is also mention of a number of quartets and trios and one source credits him with as many as 50 violin concertos but this is not confirmed elsewhere. He was in this respect the most active composer of concertos amongst the English born musicians of his day. Some fifty or so were published in his lifetime and these followed Geminiani's example in the preferred four-movement scheme and in his use of a concertino group of two violins, viola and cello as opposed to the two violins and cello of Corelli and Handel. The twelve for string orchestra are arrangements of Domenico Scarlatti's harpsichord sonatas and are reported as being more adventurous than the other concerto grossi and show a lively feeling for orchestration and a boldness of invention which is lacking in some of the concertos of the other sets. Following his death, however, his music remained largely unperformed, but I am pleased to say that even as I write work is in hand at the Northumbria University to restore some of his original manuscripts and house these in an Avison Archive in the town's Central Library. There is, as well as The Avison Society, a long established early music group, Concert Royal, that has received a grant from the Regional Arts Lottery Fund to continue keeping alive the music of Tyneside's most famous Georgian musician.

Avison was as much respected for his critical and theoretical writings as for his musical compositions. It was stated in the last volume of Burney's History of Music, 1789, that, *'musical criticism has been so little cultivated in this country that its first elements are hardly known'* and then goes on to credit Avison with being the first and almost the only writer who attempted it. This reference was to Avison's famous 'Essay on Musical Expression' of 1752 and subsequent editions. These provoked much discussion and several public replies. The strength of Avison's Essay is that it presents the plain good sense of a genuine if minor composer, but it's criticisms of other leading composers including Vivaldi, Palestrina and Handel as being guilty of subordinating harmony to melody or vice versa, enraged some of his contemporaries and brought a furious reaction from William Hayes of Oxford University, whose anonymously published pamphlet attacked Avison the composer as lacking the skill to justify his credentials as a theorist. Avison replied with dignity to his *"virulent, though, I flatter myself, not formidable, Antagonist"* countering his criticisms of specific passages with

reasoned defences and the citation of parallels in generally admired composers. Avison comes to life in this letter and his forthright style is like a breath of fresh air compared to the stuffy convoluted academic style of his 'anonymous' detractor. But to Avison's detriment he is at times less than eloquent, which sadly detracts from the cultured image he so carefully cultivated. It is not difficult to appreciate, even today, why there was all the fuss; Avison, the provincial musician daring to criticise Handel, the musical God of his day and the King's favourite to boot, as regards his over use of pictorialism in music: -

*'What shall we say to excuse this same great Composer, who, in his Oratorio of Joshua, condescended to amuse the vulgar Part of his Audience, by letting them hear the sun stand still?'*

It has been said that Avison in his critical writings showed more of the enthusiast than the unbiased critic but nevertheless they give a first hand insight into his approach to music and the musical scene of his time.

In his criticism of Handel, Avison was reacting to the over pictorialism or imitation of nature in music which was a big issue in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The term 'nature' was a synonym for feeling, spontaneity, and expressiveness and was seen as an abuse that indicated nature could mean anything and so it became a convenient weapon that all factions used for their own purposes. Art viewed as an imitation of nature reduced it to a pleasing lower truth in that it lacked intellectual substance. It was largely this that resulted in music being banished by the philosophers of the day from the domain of art. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, however, the issue was eventually modified and music was accepted in its own right as art.

Charles Avison died at his home in Green Court, Newcastle, in May 1770 and was buried beside his wife, now in St Andrews's churchyard. His death was marked by a simple obituary in the local paper that read;

*'Thursday died Charles Avison, upwards of 30 years organist in this town. His loss is greatly lamented by all that had the pleasure of his acquaintance for he was much valued for the amiableness of his private character as admired for his skill in the profession and for his excellent compositions'*

A century after his death a certain Grand March for harpsichord briefly brought him the glory of resurrection, but even before that his name was widely known by a simple strain of music. Thomas Moore, the Irish poet, wrote a poem, which begins 'Sound the loud Timbrel' and in 1816 adapted it to a portion of a movement from one of Avison's concertos. He penned a footnote to the arrangement which said '*I have so altered the character of this Air which is from the beginning of one of Avison's old-fashioned concertos that, without this acknowledgement, it could hardly, I think, be recognised'* It was decent of Moore to acknowledge the source of his melody but it did not do him any good even though the tune was a hit and he came in for a lot of criticism. In the music world

perhaps honesty is not always the best policy. It was the march, however, that allegedly inspired the poet, Browning to immortalise Avison in his 'Parleyings with Certain People of Importance in Their Day'. published not long before the poet's death. The following quote from the work appears on Avison's gravestone: -

"On the List  
of worthies who by help of pipe or wire  
expressed in sound Rough Race or Soft Desire  
Thou Whilom of Newcastle Organist"

Today, Charles Avison ranks alongside the best of his English contemporaries and could undoubtedly have had a more distinguished career had he courted success, yet in spite of not doing so his legacy lives on. He still retains a certain distinction for an outsider; an uncompromising provincial musician, in that he continues to have articles written about him and is referred to and discussed in most of the leading musical dictionaries and encyclopaedias as well as in other critical musical publications. Having said all that there still remains that nagging feeling that he is being denied his rightful place in the roll of honour of 18<sup>th</sup> century English musicians. But before we explore this let us have a closer look at the tenuous link between Avison and Browning – these two men who lived their lives one hundred years apart.

Why should Avison from Newcastle have appealed so much to Browning, who hailed from Dorset It is generally accepted that the little march attributed to Avison which Browning is said to have found in his mother's papers after her death, inspired him to include the composer in his 'Parleyings' but in fact Browning must have heard other music by Avison if, as is alleged, he loved him so much. (He even contributed towards a new headstone for Avison) One explanation is that as a young man Browning took musical instruction from John Relfe (1763–1837) organist, English musical theorist and composer. Relfe composed sonatas amongst other things and perhaps because of this and the fact he was a fellow church organist, he would have been aware of Avison and his compositions, some of which were published in London, and through Relfe, Browning was introduced to Avison's works. Through Relfe, Browning also acquired knowledge of music theory and composition and as a literary man (although long in doubt whether he should not become a musician) would no doubt have acquainted himself with Avison's musical criticisms etc. Browning wrote his 'Parleyings' when he was seventy three years old and in a sense it is a summary of his career in that it is full of reminiscences and deals with men whose works connected themselves with his own intellectual sympathies and imaginative pleasures of his early youth. On dealing with Avison, whom it seems Browning had loved as a boy, he wonders whether Avison's music is as dead as the winter landscape before him (as he gazed into the early spring garden) '*Once it had captivated audiences and seemed perfect yet now when one has become accustomed to the complicated harmonies of Wagner, Brahms and Liszt it seems so simple. It no longer has the power to shine as it once had*'. Browning explains

that he is saddened at the transitory quality of great music but considers how it is possible to rekindle the life of the past by putting ourselves in sympathy with the age that had gone before. Avison's music, he goes on to say, can live again. Browning also reflects on how truth was in human kind from the beginning and though the forms may fade, the art that captured the truth for its age is of infinite value in preserving the truth of that time, and he ends by proclaiming that Avison's little march provides the harmonic seeds for progress towards new musical moulds.

Obviously at the time of its publication someone was impressed enough with Browning's tribute to have the above-mentioned quote from 'Parleyings' chiselled into Avison's headstone. Whoever chose the wording, chose it carefully because if we refer back to Browning's original text and extend the quotation the meaning is somewhat different: -

"I o'erlooked the band  
Of majesties familiar, to decline  
On thee – not too conspicuous on the list  
Of worthies who by help of pipe or wire  
Expressed in sound rough rage or soft desire –  
Thou, whilom of Newcastle organist"

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE CONSPICUOUS WORTHIES

Henry Purcell's death in 1695, brought to an end what is generally referred to as the first great period of English music. After that date English music is said to have receded into the doldrums and nothing of any great event happened until the arrival of Handel in 1710. His impact was so great on the English music scene as to almost render its native composers extinct. His total output would equal that of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven all put together. His arrival on the London music scene also gave rise to considerable rivalry between him and other successful Italian composers active in the capital at the time, which is beautifully summed up in an epigram written by the Lancashire poet, John Byrom: -

“Some say, compared with Buononcini,  
That Mynheer Handel's but a ninny;  
Others aver that he to Handel  
Is scarcely fit to hold a candle;  
Strange all this difference should be  
'TwiXt Tweedeldum and Tweedeldee!”

London was the centre of musical life and at the heart of it, following the death of Queen Anne, was the Hanoverian King, George I, whom Handel had deserted to come to England. Later, however, after he had made his peace with the monarch, it is said of the king, whose English was poor, that he enjoyed Handel's company because they could converse in German. Handel's reign coincided with what is commonly referred to as the period of Baroque in English musical composition; a decorative form favoured particularly by concerto composers of the time. Baroque, from the French meaning bizarre, or as Dr Charles Burney (1726-1814) the eminent music historian preferred, after visiting Germany in 1773, '*coarse and uncouth*'. The worst excesses of the style, however, were never accepted in England. This period also saw a great influx of foreign musicians and a random survey taken at the time showed that half the composers active in London were foreigners, mainly from Italy, but also from four other countries. Thomas Arne (1710-1788) and William Boyce (1710-1779) are regarded today as the most outstanding English composers of this era. Arne showed some originality in the composition of his concerti and is remembered today mainly for his Shakespearean songs and the fact he composed Rule Britannia. The fame of Boyce, who is generally regarded as the better of the two, rests largely on his three volumes of Cathedral Music. In their day both of these

men sought Royal Patronage, popular appeal and financial gain by composing for the stage.

There were possibly as many as one hundred and fifty native composers active in London in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, many of whom would have been forgotten today but for one thing and that is they were given the royal blessing. It was obviously as important then as it is today to be in the right place at the right time and know the right people if you wanted to 'get on', and musicians were no exception. A snapshot of English musicians from the 16<sup>th</sup> century through to the early 18<sup>th</sup> century shows that those who achieved a modicum of success in their day and are remembered still, either sought Royal Patronage and/or composed in the popular style of the times and gave themselves and their work maximum exposure in theatres and popular venues where society gathered. To become a Gentleman of the Chapel Royal or a Master of the Kings Music seems to have been a *sine qua non* for lasting recognition. To be appointed to the Chapel was a great honour and looked upon as a sign of unusual musical talent. The great days of the Chapel Royal may have been over by the 1730s but a line of organists continued and the name of almost every one is well known to the student of English music history today. The list of composers who have been members is almost a roll of honour of English music. But for musicians in the provinces life took on a different meaning. Provincial music making tended to be a specialised concern. Perhaps only two English musician/composers of the 18<sup>th</sup> century managed to remain associated with one particular locality and make a name for themselves and Charles Avison was one of them. The other was Avison's contemporary, Chilcot of Bath, but as Bath was a Georgian city *par excellence*, which Queen Anne by her presence did much to enhance, it makes Avison's achievement that much more remarkable.

In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Newcastle was still a walled town and it is said that the town was contained within the walls. They stretched from the riverside to Gallowgate in the north and from New Bridge Street in the east to Westgate in the opposite direction and even within this confined space there were generous areas of parkland. In the early part of the century the town walls were still being further fortified, its defences did not lose their importance until after the battle of Culloden in 1746 when a period of comparative peace was established. In spite of its fortress appearance Newcastle had already established itself as an important industrial town and was well connected to the rest of the country by land and better connected by sea than many other sea ports. It was the discovery of coal in the area that had led to Newcastle's growth as a town of industrial importance. This points to Newcastle being, if not one of the biggest, certainly one of the richest towns in England and well connected with the capital, yet culturally it remained isolated. Within the confines of its walls the town's musical culture was largely contained within and around the leading churches of St Nicholas, St John and St Andrew, but to mention three of them. Most provincial musicians/composers were no more than minor church worthies and those in Newcastle were no exception, which is yet another reason why Avison

was outstanding in his time. In spite of it, however, his rewards were modest. There were no second class royal honours bestowed upon musicians at provincial level and little official or public recognition to mark their passing. Within the cultures of a growing industrial society, such as that which prevailed on Tyneside in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, where scientific development was paramount and the driving force was achievement, money and profit, music was only a small (and unproductive) cog in a large wheel. Avison's star pupil, William Shield, who at an early age was forced to abandon his music studies and seek manual work on the Tyne, must have been keenly aware of this situation and, unlike his master, as soon as the opportunity presented itself he packed his violin and headed towards London. He was content to turn his back on the North East and look to a future elsewhere but in spite of that he is very much part of the Newcastle story.

**William Shield** and his master, Charles Avison had much in common, yet they were as different as chalk and cheese. They were both born into a musical family, they both lived in the Georgian era and both embraced its musical culture and style. However, in as many ways Shield was the very opposite of Avison and the path he took brought him greater rewards and wider success within his lifetime. The entry for Newcastle upon Tyne in Groves Dictionary of Music and Musicians, Edition 2001, makes no reference to Shield, but that is probably because he came from Swalwell in Co. Durham. However, Shield does have a substantial entry under his own name, which gives his birthplace as Swalwell, near Newcastle upon Tyne 5, which it is not, unless you peer over the river. In Shield's day Swalwell was a village in its own right and nothing to do with Newcastle but given present day developments which have totally changed our perception of the area we can turn a blind eye to all that and include William Shield in this account of Newcastle's musical history. He was after all Avison's most talented pupil and he performed at Avison's concerts in Newcastle. It also makes an interesting diversion to compare the career paths of these two Tyneside musical giants.

Shield was born on 5<sup>th</sup> March 1748; he was, therefore, almost forty years Avison's junior. He was the son of a music master and received the first rudiments of music from his father; a singing master. At the age of six he began to practice the violin and afterwards the harpsichord, on both of which, particularly the former, he soon became proficient. Misfortune overtook young Shield at the age of nine years when his father died and left a widow and four children with very scanty means of subsistence. William, as the eldest son, found it necessary to go out and find work and he eventually became a bound apprentice to a firm of South Shield's boat builders. This episode would have a marked effect on the nine year old who had to leave his home and say goodbye to his mother, brother and sisters. Contemporary reports say that Shield often described this moment in his life with a heavy heart. He was fortunate, however, in that he found in his employer a kind and indulgent man who encouraged his love for music and subsequently he was able to continue his musical studies with

Avison and began playing the violin in local concerts and theatres. On completion of his apprenticeship he took up musical posts first in Scarborough and then in Durham. His big opportunity came, however, when armed with a letter of introduction from a prominent violinist he secured a position in the Italian Opera Orchestra at the King's Theatre in London. In the orchestra he attracted the attention of Cramer, the leader (a common name in music but this was probably William Cramer, who came to London in 1772 and was also leader of the orchestras at the Pantheon Opera House and of the Ancient Concerts) and was promoted to the rank of principal viola, a post he held for eighteen years. Later he replaced Michael Arne (1740-1786), son of Thomas Arne, as house composer to Covent Garden for which over the next thirty years he turned out numerous operas, pantomimes and afterpieces. He established a long friendship with Joseph Ritson, scholar-republican, which undoubtedly fanned his interest in folksong and music of the people, which he collected and used in his compositions. He travelled to Paris and Rome in his middle age and at around this time (1790) became a member of the King's Music. In 1817 he was appointed Master of the King's Music and on his death, in his eighties in 1829, he was buried with due ceremony in the musician's corner of Westminster Abbey. He left his viola to George IV and his library of books to Ann Stokes, with whom he had either entered into marriage or taken up residence in the late 1780s.

Shield composed from an early age but it was his stage works that brought him fame in his lifetime although they are never performed today and mostly all but forgotten. He established himself as an opera composer and wrote around 43 works for the stage, which are said to be workmanlike if not entirely original. Nevertheless, this popular genre of the day brought him a certain fame. His ballad opera 'Rosina' for example was premiered at Covent Garden on 31 December 1782 with immediate success and within five years it was being performed in Dublin, Edinburgh, Montego Bay, New York and Philadelphia. Shield was very interested in preserving musical heritages and used folk songs extensively in his stage works including those from the Tyneside region, but this approach did not meet with everyone's approval. Isaac Bickerstaff for instance, a natural comic librettist, who collaborated with Thomas Arne on his most successful opera, 'Thomas and Sally' (1761), who was of Irish decent and hated English music ( and later fled to France rather than face charges of homosexuality ) regarded Shield's efforts as a tasteless abomination. Shield experimented with orchestration and exotic flavours in music (string trios with movements in 5/4 time for example) but it was his operas with large doses of middle brow glees, strophic songs and vaudeville finales that succeeded best with Covent Garden audiences and established his fame.

As we have seen from the success of his opera 'Rosina' Shield achieved what Avison did not and that was international fame. The following extract from 'A History of Popular Music in America' by Sigmund Spaeth, gives an idea of Shield's popularity there as a song writer:

*'Two other Englishmen who contributed substantially to the early popular music of America were James Hook (1746-1827) and William Shield (1748-1829). Their careers showed a curious parallel, not only in time but in the style and quality of their work.*

*William Shield played both violin and viola, was a friend of Haydn in England and Master of the King's Music (1817), rewarded by burial in Westminster Abbey. He has been credited (probably wrongly) with the tune of Auld Lang Syne, which appears with other borrowed melodies in his opera Rosina. But he was unquestionably the composer of The Green Mountain Farmer, for which Thomas (Robert) Paine wrote the words (1798). This was one of the most popular patriotic songs of its day.*

*Other songs by William Shield to achieve success in America, as indicated by various pirated editions, were Johnny and Mary, The Streamlet, When Bidden to the Wake or Fair, My Friend and Pitcher and When First I Slipp'd My Leading Strings (all published here in 1789); The Cheering Rosary, A Smile from the Girl of My Heart and The Heaving of the Lead (1793); Ere Around the Huge Oak (1794); Old Towler (1796) Whilst with Village Maids I Stray and The Waving Willow (1797). The Wolf was a favourite in England, as were The Post Captain and The Thorn, published in America early in the nineteenth century (possibly even before 1800)'*

Spaeth goes on to say that Shield's songs continued to be sung in America into the 1820s and 1830s.

Another American writer, Julian Mates, who was more concerned with Shield's stage works, wrote:

*'Two of the elements necessary to a comic opera are original music and songs relevant to the action. As the eighteenth century progressed these elements were added, and "If we would look for sparks of brilliance (in the late eighteenth century) we must turn to the comic operas and the operatic farces.... comic operas is not a development of ballad opera, but "in reality a separate form of dramatic art"*

*Typical of the comic opera is John O'Keeffe and William Shield's 'The Poor Soldier'. It's first performance in England was in 1783, and two years later it arrived in America, where not a year went by until after 1800 that the Old American Company alone did not perform it'*

Shield, who in later life was comfortably off, was unable or unwilling to change his style to a more modern one and following a dispute with the Covent Garden manager he retired in 1797, but he did continue composing glees and songs for use in the theatre. He also turned his talents to writing on theoretical matters, publishing two anthology-textbooks of music; 'An Introduction to Harmony' (London 1800) and 'The Rudiments of Thoroughbass' (London 1815) which discuss such matters as how to harmonise folksongs. Shield composed music for popular approval not posterity. He is considered not to have been a natural

musical dramatist, his arias are static, but nevertheless his output was consistently workmanlike. The best that writers on opera seem to be able to say of his music today is that during his fifteen years as composer in residence at Covent Garden he kept the standard of music at a minimally acceptable level by his extensive borrowings from Continental composers, sometimes acknowledged, more often not. He is remembered today for the tune 'The Saucy Arethusa' that Henry Wood included in his 'Fantasia on British Sea Songs' and which has become standard fare at the last night of the Henry Wood Promenade Concerts each year. But some of us may still choose to remember him on New Year's Eve when we join hands and sing 'Auld Lang Syne'.

The man that was William Shield is captured on five sketches, which are all in the National Portrait Gallery. Two are in the archive but the three I have seen show him at the ages of fifty, seventy-five and seventy-nine years. In them we see a prosperous, portly gentleman of declining years who has obviously enjoyed life to the full. He has a kindly face and the appearance of a successful merchant who would be more at home in the club smoking room than in the orchestra pit. In pursuing his career he probably never forgot his humble beginnings and early struggles and seized every opportunity that came his way in life. He successfully worked his way into the leading musical circles of his day and concentrated on what he did best. In modern parlance he 'hit the jackpot' with his ballad operas and trivial afterpieces. He had plenty of opportunity to learn his trade playing for many years in the pit at the Kings Theatre in London. He would have been only too aware that English society of the time was more drawn to vocal than instrumental entertainment and so gave them what they wanted. It seems ironic that Avison, who dedicated himself to serious composition and his home town, and did not go out of his way to court popular appeal reached no further than local parish church organist in his lifetime and was buried without ceremony in the local church yard, whereas Shield, who took the popular road to success achieved wealth and status, became Master of the King's Music and was laid to rest in Westminster Abbey. But time appears to have redressed the balance and whilst Shield and his popular entertainments (apart from a few song arrangements by Benjamin Britten and Henry Wood ) are today of mere historical interest, Avison, the man and his music, continue to demand attention. Both men were very much of their time but Avison has that elusive quality that enables him, through his words and his music, to communicate with us across the centuries.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### THE AGE OF ELEGANCE

Arthur Milner, who spent five years researching into Avison's background in the 1950s, stated in his subsequent articles on the composer, that Avison was not the only professional musician working in the area. He went on to say that the incompleteness of local records made it impossible for him to name more than two of Avison's colleagues, and even this information, he admitted, was only gleaned from a marriage report and a dancing school advertisement both in the local press. One of them was Cornforth Gelson, an eminent music master of the town in 1751 (formerly of Edinburgh, 1744) and the other was Walter Claget, who ran a school of dancing and music in 1757. Milner added that there must have been more to provide Avison with an orchestra for his concerts. There were indeed more but many of them would have been amateur musicians, such as Dr Rotheram and Mrs Ord of Fenham and Ralph Beilby, the engraver. There was also Thomas Wright, a famous clarionet player, who published a collection of tunes adapted for the Northumbrian pipes. Avison also had a good friend in support of his musical ventures in Dr Brown, who, when he became vicar of Newcastle in 1761, is said to have zealously co-operated with his friend, the celebrated Charles Avison, in reviving a taste for music in Newcastle. He added a room to the vicarage-house for the accommodation of his musical friends at his Sunday evening concerts. There are two other Newcastle musicians of this period, who also held the prestigious post of organist at St Nicholas', and what we now know of them gives an interesting insight into what might have been the typical career progression of these provincial church organist musician/composers.

**Matthias Hawdon** was born in Newcastle in 1732 and died there on 19<sup>th</sup> March 1789. His father, Thomas Hawdon, was parish clerk at All Saints Church. Matthias Horden was organist at Holy Trinity, (Hull) (1751-69) succeeding his teacher William Avison, at Beverley Minster (1769-76) and, from December 1776, at St Nicholas's Newcastle upon Tyne. In Newcastle he directed the Subscription Concerts, assuming the duties previously undertaken by Charles Avison, snr. and Edward Avison. In 1778 Hawdon conducted performances at a four-day festival held in the Assembly Rooms, prominently featuring the music of Handel. Hawdon composed a number of works including six sonatas Spirituel and Voluntary which are said to be in the style wavering between Baroque and Galant. His responsiveness to the senior Avison's musical influences is said to show itself in the six Conversation Sonatas, Op 2 for harpsichord/pianoforte, 2 x violins and violoncello, announced in 1778. Although at times displaying routine

features, Hawdon's compositions in general are said to be pleasing and his organ music in particular reflects his admiration for Handel. His hymn tune 'Beverley' may still be in use today. He was buried in St Nicholas Cathedral under the Harris-Snetzler organ. An appropriate resting-place for an organist, I am sure you will agree.

**Thomas Thompson** was born in Sunderland in 1777. His father, who excelled in the science of music, was the pupil of James Hesletine, organist at the cathedral in Durham. In 1778 Thompson, snr. moved to Newcastle, where his son, Thomas, at the early age of nine years was *initiated into the practice* of the violin and French horn under the tuition of his father, and performed on the horn at the theatre and at concerts when only twelve years of age. It is stated in an historic account of the city of 1827 that at about this time, i.e. 1789, young Thompson had lessons on the pianoforte from Hawdon, son of Matthias, who was the organist at All Saints from 1789 to his death in 1793. It is also stated that Thomas Thompson had lessons on the organ and pianoforte from Charles Avison, the son of the celebrated Avison, and at the beginning of 1793 he was placed under the tuition of Muzio Clementi (Italian pianist, conductor, publisher 1752-1832) and also received instruction from Frick in thorough-bass and composition. Apparently he was so keen on his violin studies that he practised for ten hours a day. He returned from London, however, in 1794 as the chosen successor to Hawdon at All Saints and the following year he succeeded Charles Avison jun., at St Nicholas Cathedral. He continued his studies and in 1801 and 1803 he had lessons from G. B. Cramer (German pianist, teacher, publisher 1771-1858) and occasionally visited London to receive lessons from Ries (German pianist, violinist, cellist, conductor 1784-1838), Kalkbrenner (German pianist and teacher 1785-1849) and other eminent masters. He performed at the Newcastle subscription concerts and a contemporary report states that the brilliancy of his finger in rapid passages and the still more striking feeling, expression and taste displayed in the cantabile parts of the performance never failed to call forth great and merited applause. He also played the organ at the Newcastle festival of 1796 (under the patronage of Prince William of Gloucester) and again at the festivals of 1814 and 1824. He taught music and in this respect he would have visited the wealthy homes of his clients as he is recorded as being punctual and his behaviour was kind and conciliatory. He composed mostly songs and duets which are said to be elegant and pleasing and marked by a simple and flowing melody. He also published two airs with variations; 'Cease your Funning' and an original 'Thema', which it is said would do credit to any master.

Newcastle's musical heritage is not only comprised of those who were born on the banks of the River Tyne but must include those who for one reason or another chose to come to Newcastle and devote their lives (or at least some of them) to the furtherance of music within the town. Later still we need to give consideration to all those internationally famous instrumentalists and singers, who were prepared to brave the north-eastern climate and share their art and by

example raise the standards and expectations of those who were fortunate enough to hear them. One of the earliest and most interesting of the outsiders to come to Newcastle was **William Herschel** (1738-1822). He was the son of a military musician in Germany and when young became an oboist and violinist in the regimental Hanoverian band and was posted to Durham with the band in 1755. He later returned to England and led an active life as a composer of symphonies, concertos, chamber music, organ pieces and sacred works including many anthems. His own writings show that he wanted to establish himself in Newcastle, but for reasons that have not been recorded, it was not to be. However, in 1761, whilst in the town he conducted a band of thirty musicians to honour the King's coronation day and also over a seven months period between June 1760 to January 1761 he directed weekly orchestral concerts in 'a garden after the style of Vauxhall' in Newcastle. This would probably have been Spring Gardens, at the far end of Gallowgate, which at that time were a favourite summer resort of the townspeople. He became a British citizen in 1802 and was knighted in 1816. In addition to his many other talents he was a keen astronomer, a member of the Royal Society, and in 1780 or thereabouts he constructed the 'Herschel' telescope, which led to his discovery of the planet Uranus.

18<sup>th</sup> century Newcastle may have been a small compact town enclosed within its walls but it had a thriving musical life. Today we might look upon Charles Avison as a bit of a social climber and a cultural snob given his humble beginnings and after all he did raise the subscription charge for his concerts thereby consciously or otherwise excluding all but the wealthiest in the town from attending. It is an unfortunate truth that some form of intellectual snobbery has always attached itself to 'classical music' and has worked to its disadvantage and against its acceptance by ordinary folk. It permeated concert life and in a similar way was evident in leading theatres, where it took the form of social rather than intellectual snobbery. This did not go unnoticed in the 1830s when the Theatre Royal, Grey Street was built and the new building was suitably provided with distinct box, pit and gallery entrances to isolate the 'nobs' from the 'plebs'. But going back to Avison's subscription concerts we must keep in mind that they were an innovative idea so far as Newcastle was concerned. There were no public concerts as such and the greater public concert audience did not exist. Concerts were usually informal gatherings and the music was often incidental or something audiences could enjoy and take part in whilst they were eating and drinking. No doubt the majority of ordinary folk were happy making their own music elsewhere in boozy togetherness. I would image, however, that Avison's concerts were more formal affairs, where the music was taken seriously, but, if as claimed, he was devoted to introducing his audiences' (the public) to new music then it would only have been the select few who stood to benefit from this.

Nevertheless, by the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century there seems to have been a growing interest and awareness of music in Newcastle. There were dancing schools, instrument makers and instrument dealers. By 1838 there were twenty-

two music academies listed in the Directory for Newcastle and Gateshead. Until 1778 there were no directories in Newcastle, the first was drawn up and published by William Whitehead, musical instrument maker and turner of High Bridge. He went on to publish a number of further directories until his death in December 1792. Another aspect of musical life that was to take hold in the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century in Newcastle and flourish in the following century was the theatre. The first Theatre Royal opened its doors on Mosley Street in 1788 and until 1836 presented between straight drama, comic opera and other musical events. The story of Newcastle's theatres and their music is both interesting and amusing and I shall return to them in a later chapter.

There were many other musical activities taking place in the town involving people from all social classes. People who did not give a fig for Mr Avison's art music but found melodious strains necessary as an accompaniment to their entertainments. Formal balls and dance evenings were held in the Old Assembly Rooms, which stood on the opposite side of the street to the present building, until 1736 when the New Assembly Rooms in the Groat Market were erected. Forty years later, in 1776, the present Assembly Rooms in Fenkle Street were built, and they in turn saw many happy hours glide away to the magic sound of gay dance music *'in the good old time when George II was king. Periwigs, powder and patches, full skirted coats, ample hoops and silver buckles'*. There would also have been select gatherings of gentlemen in their exclusive clubs or homes as well as half starved and unwashed bodies from the lower classes in bawdy taverns and quayside haunts singing amongst other things popular rounds and catches. The catch was a type of comic round for male voices, which had been popular in England from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. All social classes of men sang them. How and where the catch came from is not entirely clear but it is thought to have started as an amusement for the moneyed and privileged and then spread to the lower social groups. The words were often obscene and usually on such subjects as drink, tobacco and sex. One cannot imagine Charles Avison turning his hand to catches but Henry Purcell was not above doing so when he wrote *"Once, twice, I Julia try'd / The scornful puss as oft deny'd"*. When William Jackson, organist of Exeter Cathedral in the 1790s stated that catches were three parts obscenity to one part music, Purcell's verse was cleaned up to read *"One, two, three our numbers right / To sing our song tonight"*.

Also sung in 18<sup>th</sup> century Newcastle, but more acceptable in general music circles, would have been the glee. The main inspiration behind the 18<sup>th</sup> century glee was the English madrigal of 1590 – 1630 and to a generation whose experience of partsong was largely limited to obscene catches, the flowing lines, sensuous textures and poetic seriousness of the Elizabethan and Jacobean madrigal came as a revelation and a challenge. Again, as with the catch the glee started in the upper social classes and grew in popularity until by the 19<sup>th</sup> century it had even spread to the lower social groups when an increase in the popularity of choral singing brought together the different social classes with the common aim of making music. The vocal groupings in glees called upon women to sing

the soprano parts and reflected a social acceptance of women into choral clubs and singing groups of the day, which had been exclusively male dominated. There is no record that I can trace of any glee club in Newcastle in the 1700s, but I think we can accept that there must have been a Glee Club as they continued meeting through the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries and so far as I know may still be harmonising their way through the 21<sup>st</sup>.

Further down the artistic and social scale, but at the very core of Newcastle's musical heritage, are the Tyneside songs that are as much alive today as they were centuries ago. The North East or Northumbria was unique in that it had a corpus of folksongs, pipe tunes and sword dances that were not found elsewhere in Britain. There were distinct racial factors that set Northumberland apart from the rest of the country and gave it a unique identity in its music of the people in its various forms No less an authority than Dr W.G. Whittaker (1876-1944) strongly affirmed the singularity of Northumbria as being neither English nor Scottish but both and neither. The early songs reflected the hardships and deprivations of working class life and one of the earliest, 'Come you not from Newcastle', can be traced back to the time of Queen Elizabeth I. Other contemporary dialect songs reflected aspects of the poorer people's lives. 'The Keel Row' was popular as long ago as 1760. Later songs celebrated popular sports such as horse racing, prize fighting and rowing and a song called, 'The Toon Improvement Bill' lamented the loss of playing space which resulted from the building of the Central Station. Newcastle being a port gave rise to songs about the Press Gangs, which officially ceased in 1815 but were still active in Newcastle as late as 1839. Captain John Bover, who seems to have been feared in this respect has a memorial tablet in the Cathedral. A local verse, in answer to the question, 'Where es ti been, maw canny hinny?' addressed to a sailor, included the lines 'Aw've been ti the norrard, Cruising back and forrard, But daurna come ashore – For Bover and his gang'. On a sadder note a song of around 1842 reflects the feelings of those who saw their friends sentenced to fifteen years penal servitude by a judge on the Northern Circuit for stealing:-

*'Oh! 'tis a cruel sentence for a man to leave his wife,  
His children, and his dearest friends, all dearer than his life;  
To leave the land that gave him birth, to see it p'haps no more,  
And drag a wretched life in chains, upon a distant shore.  
The rich have no temptations, they have all things at command  
And 'tis for pleasure and for health, they leave their native land;  
But a starving wife and family, makes a poor man's heart to break,  
And makes him do what brings a blush of shame upon his cheek.'*

The audience for these songs would not have been receptive to high art, which was shown when Paganini (1782-1840) the virtuoso violinist, made a tour of the North East and the following was written:-

*"Hats off, smash your brains, here comes greet Baggy Nanny"*

*An ootlandish chap seun appeared on the stage,  
And cut as odd capers as wor maister's flunkey.  
He skipped and he fiddled as if in a rage –  
If he had but a tail he'd a passed for a monkey,  
Deil smash a gud teun could this bowdykite play –  
His fiddle wad hardly e'en please my auld granny –  
So aw weun joined me marrows and toddled away,  
And wished a good neet to the greet Baggy Nanny.*

So far as any higher musical culture was concerned this shows up the general ignorance that predominated at the time but it is redeemed here by the absence of malice and its unique humour, which captures, in local dialect, the open and generous spirit of the North East. The distinction between Northumbrian folk song and the more esoteric Tyneside songs has over the years become blurred and the origins of some of the older ones are lost in the mists of time. Typical of the earlier attitude taken by the North East towards its musical heritage is the speed of the response to the warning given by Cecil Sharp, folk song collector, who pointed out that the tradition was rapidly dying following the Industrial Revolution and by the time the Society of Antiquaries of Newcastle upon Tyne attempted, in 1885, to collect the old Northumbrian ballads, they had to sadly record that they were “*Half a century too late*”

One of the most beautiful melodies to come down to us today is the song ‘The Waters of The Tyne’, which has appeared in many songbooks since 1793. To hear this sung by a lonely unaccompanied voice in a hall packed with Tynesiders, sitting in absolute silence, can be a very emotional experience. Perhaps this form of song has been the most enduring aspect of Tyneside’s musical culture and it will never die so long as there are people on the banks of the River Tyne. Even today, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the bells of the Civic Centre chime to the tune of Blaydon Races - hailed as Tyneside’s national anthem.

We seem to have drifted away from Avison’s Newcastle, but before we take our leave of Charles Avison and Georgian Newcastle I must mention that other great personality of the period, Blind Willie. He is generally regarded as Tyneside’s most outstanding character. William Purvis was blind from birth and unlike Avison he drifted into music as a means of earning a living. His fiddle, his voice, his flying hair and his talent for simple compositions ensured for him a ready audience in the taverns around the Cloth Market. He was to become closely associated with one particular tavern known as Hell’s Kitchen. They say that Blind Willie never ever saw the dawn break over Newcastle. I have a mental picture of these two legendary musicians performing within a few hundred yards of each other, one soberly sitting at the organ in a house of God accompanying good citizens at their devotions and the other frantically scraping at his fiddle with the Devil at his elbow, improvising his own tunes to a grotesque drunken crowd tottering at the gateway to Hell itself. This exaggerated picture could well be an omen for the future when the self styled, sober, prosperous and pious would see

in 'good' music a means of saving the lower classes from the temptations of alcohol and the error of their ways.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### THE GRAND MUSIC FESTIVALS

One of the prominent features of musical life across the country during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries was the Grand Music Festival. The occasional event when the big choral works of Handel were presented by augmented choirs with orchestra in the church and lighter instrumental and vocal entertainments were laid on in the evenings with perhaps a ball or some other social event to round off the festival. The most famous of these festivals was the 'Three Choirs' at Worcester, Gloucester and Hereford in turn from around 1715. Birmingham started their festivals in 1768, Norwich in 1770 and Sheffield in 1786. Newcastle's first Music Festival took place in 1778 and they continued at irregular intervals until 1842. After a lapse of thirty-five years, following the 1842 Festival, an article appeared in the local press which began as follows; -

*'It has been a surprise to some who are in the habit of lamenting the inferiority of Newcastle to such towns as Leeds and Birmingham in the matter of triennial Musical Festivals, to find that more than a century ago the capital of Tyneside set the example to many towns that have since wrested the palm of musical pre-eminence from her. It may be interesting, in view of the proposed resumption of our local Musical Festivals, to recount, so far as existing chronicles permit, the cardinal incidents in regard to those great occasions when, according to current criticisms, "an immense concourse" of the nobility and gentry came together from the "neighbouring counties" and "a crowd of beauty and fashion thronged the streets": when special steam-packets were run on the river, and inns and lodging-houses were so hard pushed to provide accommodation that a single night's rest could not be obtained for less than four guineas.'*

To some extent the above introduction to the 1877 newspaper article captures the essence of what these festivals were all about. Grand music spectacles, laid on to impress; employing large forces of mainly imported talent at great expense and attended by the upper crust of local society. Initially, they appear to have been largely self sponsored by those organizing and performing in the festival, but later it was thought that local businesses and tradesmen, who together with local landlords had welcomed the influx of people into the town for obvious reasons, should contribute part of the profits they made from the festival to the cost of the festival. Some of these Grand Music Festivals held in Newcastle made a profit and where they did part of it went to charitable causes. Why the Grand Music Festivals ceased to be held in Newcastle is not recorded (the festival referred to in the above newspaper article would have been a lower key

local affair) but I suspect they outlived their appeal and the initial enthusiasm of the 18<sup>th</sup> century for the uplifting choral works of Handel waned. The Three Choirs Festival lived on through Edward Elgar and its ability to adapt to more modern choral works by contemporary British composers but in Newcastle; music in St Nicholas' was frowned upon by a certain section of the community. In other words, religious bigotry, which showed itself at the last of the festivals in 1842, proved hard to overcome.

The first Music Festival took place in October 1778 and was held in the Assembly Rooms. Four days were devoted exclusively to the performance of choral works by Handel. These included 'Alexander's Feast', 'Judas Maccabeus', 'Acis and Galatea', and 'The Messiah', and the whole thing seems by all accounts to have been a great success. The artists appear to have been local, as was the festival's conductor, Mr Hawdon. A comment in the press pointed out that '*between acts attention was relaxed by an organ concerto by Signor Rush*', which if nothing else proves what wonderful staying power the audiences who attended these festivals had back in 1778. City records show that the next Music Festival was not until 1791, which saw a move toward the 'Grand' Music Festival. The 1791 Music Festival boasted '*a grand selection of music as performed in Westminster Abbey*' and the programme was again made up almost entirely of works by Handel; 'Joshua', 'Israel in Egypt', 'Jephtha', 'Samson', 'Omnipotence', 'Solomon', 'Athalia', 'Theodoro', 'Saul', 'Nabal' and the ever popular 'Messiah'. There was also an extensive selection of pieces from Handel compositions given in St Nicholas' but to list them all would run the risk of giving the reader musical indigestion. Nor shall I list all the artists, but I must make mention of Madame Mara, the star of the festival. Gertrud Elizabeth Schmeling, born 1749, spent her childhood touring the Continental and British provinces as a sort of *Wunderkind* on the violin, to keep her father out of debtor's prison. After some vocal training she got herself accepted at the court of Frederick the Great. Thereafter she led a highly colourful life and by 1784 had established herself in London, where for the next eighteen years she remained unsurpassed in the oratorios of Handel and Haydn. She left London in 1802 and sang her way to Moscow, where she hoped to retire but lost her home and all her belongings in the siege of 1812. She died in 1833 at the age of eighty-four. The festival, by all accounts, seems to have been a great success, which was not the case of that held five years later. The 1796 Grand Music Festival, under the patronage of Prince William, Duke of Gloucester, and the management of Messrs. Meredith and Thompson, was a financial disaster. Again the music was almost wholly Handelian with performances in St Nicholas' and the Assembly Rooms. The band which comprised professional and amateur musicians was lead by Mr Cramer from London. It was said that the failure of this festival might be partly accounted for by the fact that other attractions in the town during the week divided the patronage of the public. Includon's production '*Fascinating Notes*' was drawing all the '*gay, the tasteful and the polite to the theatre*'. It being assize week, the '*assemblies were numerous and brilliant*'. These do not sound to me like the sort of people who would want to sit on hard wooden benches and listen

to Handel Oratorios and I suspect the real reasons lay elsewhere. But the local press was in sympathy with the festival organisers. They ran a piece which in summary said that along with other admirers of the friendly and estimable character of Mr Meredith and of his wonderful powers they were sorry that he had suffered so considerably by an undertaking calculated to produce delight and universal gratification.

The pecuniary failure of the 1796 Music Festival perhaps paralysed private enterprise, or the exciting events connected with the long, weary Peninsular War (between Wellington and Napoleon in the Iberian Peninsula) may have engrossed all attention, but it was not until the year peace was proclaimed in 1814 that another venture was made – this time under the patronage of a committee of influential noblemen and gentlemen. It was agreed that one fifth of all the money taken during the festival was to be handed over to the funds of the Newcastle General Infirmary. This whole event seemed to be well organised and although the standard of the orchestra and the choral singing came in for some criticism the singing of the two principal artists, Madame Catalani and Mr Braham, was outstanding. Angelica Catalani dominated her period, in her early years, as no other singer had done since Mara. She was a sensation at her London debut in 1806, therefore, I think we can safely say that Newcastle heard her at her best at the 1814 Festival. The local press reports are glowing but the truth is she was of the old school and took great liberties with the composer's music adding trills whenever it suited her. She was a forceful woman and (for political reasons) once told Napoleon to his face that she would not sing for him. She eventually went into opera management, about which her husband said that to run an opera house all that was needed was his wife and four or five puppets. Her tenor on this occasion, John Braham, was very popular with English audiences as a singer and a songwriter. He was born in London of Jewish parentage and made his stage debut at the age of ten. In his time he was one of the few singers this country had produced that could hold his own with the Italians and was consequently a great favourite at Covent Garden. He became so rich that he bought the London Colosseum and built the St James' Theatre in London, both unsuccessful speculations as it turned out. The usual formula was followed throughout the festival with sacred music in church and secular in the theatre. As a grand finale a ball was held in the Assembly Rooms, *'undertaken at the instance and for the benefit of the Chevalier de Valibregue'*, who was none other than the husband and business agent of Madame Catalani. Significant of the times was a letter to the editor of the Newcastle Weekly Chronicle from an outraged Timothy Plain, in response to a performance by a lady solo violinist, Madame Gerbini. The irate Mr Plain said *'It is unseemly as well as uncommon to behold a female playing the violin and prejudice will operate, along with her other defects, to prevent her retaining the good opinion of the public'*. But in spite of the Timothy Plains the festival was well attended and the receipts exceeded £2,300, of which a clear fifth was given to the Newcastle Infirmary.

The last two Grand Music Festivals were held in 1824 and 1842, the first being a resounding success, musically and financially but the second only musically. The vocal contributions at all of these festivals was considered the most important aspect, purely instrumental music never commanded the same attention. It was ever thus in English music making up to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It still is if one considers that the most popular night of our greatest music festival today, The Promenade Concerts, is the last, when everyone is allowed to join in and sing. At the 1824 Festival, Catalani and Braham appeared once again to great acclaim although one dissenter complained that her rendition of 'I Know that My Redeemer Liveth' from the 'Messiah' was not as good as the German lady, Madame Mara. He was probably right, Catalani had returned to England in 1824, when Lord Mount-Edgcumbe exclaimed that he found '*her powers undiminished but her taste unimproved*'. Nevertheless, the total receipts amounted to £5,846, which left £769 4s for the several charities the festival committee had agreed to support. No doubt, looking back on this festival, the organisers of the 1842 Music Festival considered that they could do even better and assembled an impressive list of patrons, who included The Duke and Duchess of Northumberland, Duke and Duchess of Roxburghe, the Marquis of Bute, the Marquis and Marchioness of Londonderry and a whole list of Counts, Earls and Lords. Came the day and it was admitted that the singers were not such great singers as at the previous festival but they were only '*triflingly their inferiors*'. Potential stars they may have been in their time but today they are long forgotten. Handel's music predominated as usual but there was a wider selection of choral pieces by other composers including Beethoven, Haydn, Hummel, Mendelssohn, and Rossini. The chorus was largely drawn from local choral societies supplemented by those from Durham, Carlisle and Lincoln, and the band of sixty-four performers was, it was reported, '*The best there has been, or has ever been heard in Newcastle*'. The festival was deemed a success from the musical point of view, but '*notwithstanding the goodly array of noble patrons and the influence and energy of the working committee, the pecuniary result was very disheartening*'. Many years later, strong religious feeling was blamed for the loss as it had been regarded by many at the time of the festival as an act of sacrilege to hold a musical 'performance' in a place of worship, and the festival had been denounced even from the pulpit. There were other music festivals of sorts held in the town, but the days of the Grand Music Festivals, which continued to survive in other parts of the country, were dead to Newcastle.

## CHAPTER SIX

### THE HARMONIC SOCIETY

In the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century there was a shift in cultural authority away from the church and monarchy to the state and private associations. The reasons for this sea change lay partly in the fact that the funds for church music schools fell into decline and the growth of cities and the rise of Parliamentary Government brought about new kinds of leadership that reshaped musical life in general. There were also changes in the way music was being perceived, less as an accompaniment to more pleasurable activities and more as a science in its own right. The rapid growth of industrial towns such Newcastle in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century led to their attempts at emulating London's amenities in the arts and not least in music. Initially town halls, especially those with an organ began serving as concert halls. This period also saw the rise of all manner of amateur musical establishments, often led by local professionals, ranging from Harmonic and Choral societies to dance schools, musical academies and schools of music. This belated recognition of the importance of music within society could not be ignored by those outside musical circles and as early as June 1798 permission was given to the Music Society in Newcastle to use the rooms of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle, once a fortnight, for private concerts. The Lit and Phil, as it is affectionately known, was founded in 1793 as a forum for the exercise of intellectual thought aimed primarily at improving society as a whole, with only Religion, the practical branch of Law, Physics and Politics, being deemed prohibited subjects of conversation within its rooms. In the following century it hosted lectures on the Science of Music as well as allowing piano recitals and talks on all manner of musical subjects from the Northumbrian pipes to Wagner's operas. The subsequent flowering of musical life in Newcastle during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century is fascinating and revealing and justifies a book in itself but we shall have to content ourselves with only the briefest summary of this period.

Charles Avison is credited with introducing the first public concerts given in the town, and these coincided with the setting-up of the Newcastle Music Society around 1737. Regardless of which came first Avison's public concerts were among the first of their kind in any provincial town and the Newcastle Music Society was one of the first of its kind in the country. It was well ahead of its time and put Newcastle on a par with London. The idea of the subscription concert, enabling the organisers to assess the size of the audiences for accommodation purposes, and settle matters of finance before the concerts took place, proved very popular with promoters in those early days. From 1800 onwards there seems to have been a proliferation of self sponsored concerts bearing the name of the promoter/performer in the title; the Volunteer Band Concerts, Cliffords'

Concerts, Mrs Bramwell's Concerts and Count Boruwlaski's Concerts. There was, however, a sameness about the programming of these concerts with Handel, Haydn and Pleyel prominently featured along with a string of other composers whose names would mean little to the average music lover today. Ignaz Joseph Pleyel's music was very popular with Newcastle audiences in the 1800s. He was born in 1757, the 24<sup>th</sup> of 38 children in an impoverished family of mixed Austrian and French parentage. A one-time pupil of Haydn, with whom he lived for a while, he wrote forty symphonies, nine concertos, eighty-nine quartets and amongst other numerous quintets, trios, duos and masses, he also wrote two operas. As well as being a composer he was a concert pianist, piano and harp manufacturer and music publisher. Truly a man of many talents. The first music society formed in Newcastle in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century was the Harmonic Society and we are fortunate in having many of its programmes preserved for us in the archives of the Newcastle City Library. As the Harmonic Society's concert meetings were typical of many of those that followed it is worth looking a little closer at the make up of its programmes over the first two seasons, which gives us a feel for the period.

Their first concert in 1815 opened with an Avison concerto, which was followed by a glee for four voices by William Horsley, born 1774, composer and organist. Next came a Grand Pianoforte Concerto by Viotti. Giovanni Battista Viotti was then considered the greatest violinist of his time and wrote 29 violin concertos but arranged some of them for piano. A duet by Braham (the same as appeared at the Grand Music Festivals) followed and Act I (concerts were then still thought of as theatrical performances) ended with an air for violin and piano by Beethoven. Act II opened with a concerto by Corelli. Arcangelo Corelli had died in 1713, therefore, his music would have been looked upon as ancient music in 1815. Unlike today much of the music performed at these concerts was by living composers. The Corelli concert was followed by one of William Shield's songs and then a vocal duet by Stevenson. Sir John Stevenson was an Irishman, who composed songs and glees. He collaborated closely with Thomas Moore, the Irish poet, who exerted a strong influence on English song making at the time. Then came a quartet by Pleyel, followed by another glee, this one by Clarke, who could well have been the same Jeremiah Clarke, of Trumpet Voluntary fame, who became a victim of unrequited love and blew out his brains with a pistol. The evening's entertainment was rounded off with a catch by Samuel Webbe, the foremost composer of this sort of thing. He was a carpenter's apprentice who had studied music on his own, between 1766 and 1792. He carried off twenty-six prizes for his glees awarded by the Noblemen's and Gentleman's Catch Club in London. He was also an organist and composed a good deal of sacred music.

We can see immediately from the above programme that the late Georgians went to concerts for entertainment rather than intellectual stimulation. The audience would have been small by today's standards; ten members of the Society with invited guests some of whom may well have performed. There

would also have been audience participation. There would certainly have been eating and drinking. My research leads me to suspect that at these early Harmonic Society concerts the audience would have been all male, rather in the nature of an exclusive gentleman's club. Their concerts continued on a regular basis through 1815 and 1816 and may well have gone on. The demise of these societies is usually lost in local history. The content of future programmes was based on what the members wanted to hear and the glees and catches of Webbe and Calcott's were very popular. The following is an example of a catch by John Calcott that was much requested at concerts in those early days; -

*Aldiborontiphoscophonio, where left now Chrononhotonthologues?  
Fatigued within his tent, by the toils of war,  
On downy couch reposing;  
Rigdumfienidos watching near him,  
While the prince is dozing.*

Before we scoff at our forefathers for being amused by such childish wordplay, we would do well to remember the amusement afforded to so many of all ages, one hundred and fifty years later, by the song 'Supercalafragilisticexpialidocius', with its 'umdiddlediddlediddle umdiddleaye' chorus, written by an American, who was so fascinated by this kind of early English song that he used the film 'Mary Poppins', set in London in 1910, as an excuse to write one.

At the third Harmonic Society concert music by Handel, Mozart and Haydn was introduced and the sixth concert comprised mostly excerpts from 'The Messiah.' The seventh concert featured another concerto by Avison but songs, glees and catches were to the fore. One in particular by an unnamed composer, performed at the fifth concert, is worthy of inclusion in the Tyneside songbook; -

*Which is the properest day to drink?  
Saturday, Sunday, Monday?  
Each is the properest day, I think,  
Why should I name but one day?*

*Tell me but yours, I'll mention mine,  
Let us but fix on some day;  
Bravo, bravo, bravo, bravo!  
Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday,  
Saturday, Sunday, Monday.*

However, these Harmonic Gentlemen from Newcastle were nothing if not patriotic and this was clearly demonstrated at the end of the last concert of the second season in 1816 when the assembled audience rose to their feet, puffed out their collective chests, proud Englishmen all, and sang:

*My pockets low and taxes high,  
Ah! I could sit me down to cry;  
But why despair? The times may mend,  
Our loyalty shall us befriend.  
Propitious fortune yet may smile  
On fair Britannia's sea girt isle.  
Then poverty shall take her flight,  
And we will sing by day and night,*

*God save great George our king,  
Long live our noble king, etc.*

After the last concert, in 1816, a piece appeared in the local press. Among other things it identified the venue of the performance as Saville Row, and the house of Mr Thompson, the organist of St Nicholas'. It then went on to say; -

*'The exertions of this society have proved a most agreeable treat to a great portion of the musical amateurs in the town. Many of the best works of Haydn, Handel, Mozart, Viotti, Beethoven, Avison, Correlli &c. &c. have been executed during the season and the unbounded approbation which has been bestowed upon the several performances is the best proof of the satisfaction they have afforded to the most crowded audiences. We know not whether it is the intention of the gentlemen forming the society to resume their meetings against another season but we can assure them they have the grateful thanks of their auditors for the amusement they have already bestowed: and hope they themselves have received gratification equal, at least, to that which they have so liberally imparted'*

Fine words indeed but unless the author of the piece had attended all the concerts in the seasons he would not have known which works by the composers listed were played and it is unlikely anyway that he would have been so musically well informed at the time as to be able to make such a statement. Having perused the programmes for the season and with the benefit of hindsight I would say that apart from Handel the claim is an exaggeration. The bulk of the items in these programmes were of a lighter nature and would have provided the audiences with – as the reviewer correctly states – some amusement. However, we must not forget that were it not for the '*exertions of the society*' none of the music of any of the composers listed would have been heard at all in performance by anyone and so we owe a small debt of gratitude to these early music societies that were in their own way helping sustain some form of musical culture within the town.

Following the success of the Harmonic Society in 1815 a number of societies with amateur in their title came into being; the Amateur Harmonic Society (1824), Amateur Music Society (1825), Newcastle and Gateshead Amateur Choral Society (1828) and the Amateur Glee Club in 1837. But there were also others that did not broadcast their amateur status such as the Phil-Harmonic Society of

1826. According to Mackenzie's 1827 historical account of Newcastle this society consisted of 100 ordinary members, who paid 4s each every month, and received three tickets of admission, and 36 honorary members, or performers, who were presented with two tickets. The audience usually consisted of about 340 persons, excluding performers and *with the ladies all dressed to pleasing effect*. The band was made up of amateurs and performed gratis. Concerts were held in the Turk's Head Hotel, Long Room in the Bigg Market. A press review of their first concert on 29<sup>th</sup> November 1826 firstly introduces the society 'a society of gentlemen in this town who entitle themselves the "Phil-Harmonic Society", and goes on to say that the music was both vocal and instrumental but it was not a concert on which criticism could be employed with the same freedom which would be called for in a public exhibition but it was justice to say that as a whole the singing and the oratorios were such as to reflect great credit on the respective parties. The reader is then informed that it was emphatically a *dress concert* and attended by upwards of 300 persons of respectability. The review ends with the following paragraph, which both points to the exclusivity of these concerts and to the entirely different approach our forefathers had to concert going:

*'A correspondent suggests the propriety of having a ball at the end of the Phil-Harmonic Society's concerts. We have ourselves repeatedly suggested the establishment of tradesmen's dancing assemblies in this town and we should be happy to see this affair taken up by the subscribers to the Phil-harmonic Society, or by a distinct set of gentlemen. Assemblies for the trading part of the community are certainly much wanted, and if properly conducted could not fail to meet with adequate support.'*

The Phil-Harmonic Society concerts and their after-concert entertainments became very popular and continued into the 1850s. Some twenty years earlier they had had to move into the Large Assembly Rooms to accommodate the growing numbers and in 1851 a letter to the Gazette suggested the society rename itself the Terpsichorean Club. However, their success did not go down well with everyone as a letter to the Editor of the Tyne Mercury in April 1837 shows.

*'Sir,*

*The Standard newspaper has been made the vehicle of an attempt to ridicule the Concerts of this Society, the leader and the committee knowing well and thoroughly the contemptible little catiff from whom these puny dribblings of tap house wit have emanated. The committee can laugh at his puny malice, and even afford to wish that he may be able to muster a more numerous list of subscribers when he brings forward his threatened opposition, than he did the last time he failed in this creditable manoeuvre. But his brutal attack upon a talented amateur deserves and will receive from every right-minded person the most unqualified reprobation. Had it been in his power to injure his own lost character in this town, this would have furnished the coping-stone to the column*

*of his besotted folly. It is lucky the gentleman in question is not so fierce in his manner as he is described to be in his flute playing, otherwise the reptile might again have received the chastisement, unhappily too much neglected by his infatuated parent, and which he has more than once before received from persons he has insulted; but, alas! you may bray a fool in a mortar and his folly will not depart from him. Should he persist in his past and present courses, he may find that the public opinion will force him again upon his travels.*

*I am, Sir, &c*

*A CORRESPONDENT'.*

Although this exchange of insults between rivals makes for interesting reading it is not typical of the period and where concert meetings were commented upon in the press they tended to be self-congratulatory. The Phil-Harmonic was not of course the only society giving concerts at this time. There was a series of Miscellaneous Concerts also being given in the Turk's Head Long Room in 1825, the Amateur Music Society were doing the same at about the same time and by November 1826 The Amateur Harmonic Society was giving its twenty-sixth concert (all songs) in the Joiners Hall. Further down the social scale the Newcastle and Gateshead Choral Society were giving what they termed as public exhibitions. The Society proudly boasted that its members came from the humbler walks of life but in talent and perseverance had set an example worthy of the highest imitation. It was the choral societies perhaps more than any other that brought together people from all walks of life with the one aim of making music. A Mr Ingham was giving concerts in the Music Hall on Blakett Street in November 1830, under the patronage of the Town Mayor and a Mr Richard Carte did even better during the period 1839 – 1843 in securing the patronage of Her Grace, The Duchess of Roxburghe, The Hon Lady Williamson, Lady Blakett, The Right Worshipful Mayor of Newcastle and The Sheriff of Newcastle for a series of Grand Subscription Concerts in the Assembly Rooms. So the musical life of Newcastle went on through the 1840s and the 1850s with the Newcastle Sacred Harmonic and Choral Society giving performances of the ever popular 'Messiah' in the Music Hall, Nelson Street and the Temperance Choral Society (one imagines not very well supported in Newcastle) announcing a Musical Soiree on Boxing Day 1849 with the words 'TEA ON THE TABLES AT 5 O'CLOCK' prominently printed on their leaflet.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century concerts also took place in the theatres of Newcastle, which with the opening of the first Theatre Royal in Mosley Street on the 26<sup>th</sup> January 1788 became a great attraction for the growing pleasure seeking society of the early 1800s. That is not to say that the concerts put on in the theatres were all froth, far from it. The Theatre Royal, Mosley Street presented a grand concert of selections from Handel's sacred oratorios on 3<sup>rd</sup> March 1819, between two plays and seven days later repeated the formula. In August 1840 a series of Promenade Concerts were tried in the Theatre Royal, Grey Street but proved to be a dismal failure. However, other performances seem to have proved more

successful, such as (once again!) Handel's 'Messiah' in April 1843 and performances of Mozart's 12<sup>th</sup> Mass and Haydn's Creation Part 1, two days later. But the real impact of the theatre upon the town's musical heritage lay in the stage productions with music, which I shall deal with in more detail in a later chapter. Many of these early musical concerts were in aid of charity such as those given in October 1834 in the Large Assembly Rooms by a body calling itself, the Northumberland, Durham and Newcastle Amateur Concerts. The press review following the concerts talks of the instrumental band consisting of 50 and 60 performers – forming altogether the largest band ever heard in this town – but then goes on to raise the often to be repeated statement, '*the opportunity of practice only is wanting to rescue Newcastle from the reproach of being the only large town in England, in which an efficient band cannot be got together*' I doubt whether that was entirely true as early as 1834, bearing in mind that the Manchester and Liverpool orchestras were amongst the first in the 1840s and 1850s. but the words did have a prophetic ring of truth about them.

There does seem to have been a flurry of musical activity in the town around this time but it has to be said, not of a very high standard. I refer here more to the content than the performers, who were mostly amateurs anyway. Reading through the many programmes from this period it becomes apparent that there is a sameness about them all. I have already mentioned the predominance of Handel and audiences' penchant for glees, catches, ballads and songs of every kind but what of the instrumental pieces programmed and who were the popular composers of the time? I noticed that Bach's name was listed once and Mozart a couple of times but most of the others are long forgotten. Who today knows Anfossi, Davaux, Mahor, Mazzinghi, Rigel, Rofetti or Rohde to mention but only seven of them. On the other hand the cognoscenti might just be familiar with Kozeluh, (1747-1815) a Czech, who was contemptible of Mozart and had no time for Beethoven (Beethoven called him *Miserabilis*) and who was considered the greatest composer in Europe in 1800 but by 1830 was forgotten. Or, Krumpholtz, (1742-1790) who, in his day was considered the world's greatest harpist. All his musical compositions are said to have included the instrument. Alas! He was destined to a certain musical obscurity in this world when he threw himself into the icy River Seine in Paris after his young wife and favourite pupil, eloped to London with an Adonis-like concert pianist, but no doubt he achieved immortality in the next world having wisely chosen the right instrument in this one.

The trouble with concerts in Newcastle at around this period seems to have been that no one was setting critical standards and popularity was dictating demand. The Phil-Harmonic Society is a good example in that its original objective was '*the refinement of the public taste, by the performance of classical music*' and it ended up the most popular ball in town. It could be said that Newcastle was lapsing into a sort of musical provincialism, run by local musicians. But then Charles Avison had been a local musician. The difference was that he had kept his finger firmly on the musical pulse of his day and this was reflected in his compositions. He had also endeavoured to set high critical

standards in his writing and had exercised some influence over his local contemporaries. In addition he had sought to educate his audiences through his subscription concerts and not simply entertain them by pandering to popular public taste. For ninety years following the death of Charles Avison no other musician had any effect on the musical life of the town until a very talented professional musician from London took up an appointment as Council Organist and revitalized the town's flagging musical life. His name was William Rea.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### DR WILLIAM REA

I had not heard of William Rea before I began researching Newcastle's musical history and, I am sad to say, nor had anyone else I spoke to in Newcastle. All my inquiries met with a complete blank, it were as though he had never existed. Yet it would be no exaggeration to say that after Avison he did more to promote a higher musical culture in Newcastle than anyone else did. As I thumbed my way through collections of old programmes his name kept reappearing. It seemed at various times he fulfilled the role of council and church organist, pianist, conductor, choir master, arranger, organizer, lecturer and many other things besides. The man's energy astounded me and very soon I found Dr Rea demanding my full attention. Unlike Avison, Rea was not a native Tynesider and I very soon found myself puzzling again over what made this man with such musical potential decide to bury himself in an organist's post in England's most northerly outpost? I don't profess to know the answer even now and may never know but I can say that the town's musical history would have been the poorer without him. In the same way as Charles Avison had done he did much to promote Newcastle as one of the leading provincial music centres in the country and much more than Avison he worked hard at bringing music of a high standard to the ordinary people of the town.

William Rea was born in London on 25<sup>th</sup> March 1827. From being young he showed a remarkable aptitude for music and at an early age was placed under Mr Joseph Pitman, an eminent musician, who invented the pedal organ and introduced Bach's fugues into England. Rea made such rapid progress that before he was in his teens he was acting as deputy to his master, who held the appointment of organist at Spitalfields. In his eagerness to study harmony under Schnyder von Wartensee, Rea took himself to the Continent. At sixteen years of age he was studying piano, composition and instrumentation under Sterndale Bennett (1816-75) and by 1843 had secured an appointment as organist at Christ Church, Watney Street. Two year later he appeared as soloist in a piano concerto at a concert sponsored by the Society for British Musicians, formed in 1834 with the objective of advancing native talent in composition and performance. Shortly after, he was appointed organist at St Andrews Undershaft but soon vacated the post to go abroad again. In 1849 he went to Leipzig, where he studied under Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870), a brilliant pianist and head of the Piano Department at the Conservatory, and also under Ernst Friedrich Eduard

Richter (1808-79), Cantor of the Thomas School and a master on harmonic theory. It was here he achieved the highest estimation of his art, which for the rest of his life remained one of his most prominent characteristics. From Leipzig Rea went to Prague and studied under Alexander Dreyschock (1818-69), pianist, teacher and composer and considered a rival of Liszt in technical dexterity. In all Rea spent three years on the Continent. On his return to London he gave a series of chamber concerts in the Beethoven Rooms and in 1853 was appointed organist to the Harmonic Union, which had Julius Benedict (1804-85) as its conductor. In 1856 Rea founded the London Polyhymnian Choir, comprising all male voices on the same lines as the Cologne Minnersanger Verein in Germany, which was a great success. Around this time he was also conductor of an amateur orchestra. In 1858 he took up what was to be his last London appointment as organist at St Michael's in Stockwell. In 1860 the Newcastle Council advertised a post for Council Organist and Rea applied. Although there were many applicants for the post Rea was so outstanding the others were immediately dismissed and he got the job.

A brief summary of Rea's contribution to the history of music in Newcastle, such as that given in his obituary notice (see below) does not do full justice to the man but it is impressive nevertheless. As council organist he gave weekly organ and piano recitals in the Town hall. In 1867 he began a series of choral and orchestral concerts – over a month at a time- every season for nine years. Eminent artists were engaged and the most famous works were well performed. After the collapse of these concerts he gave three subscription concerts annually that were well supported by leading musical amateurs. At various times he was organist at St Andrews, St Mary's (Tyne Dock) and Elswick Road Chapel. He published a few compositions but they were said to show reserve. His life's work was principally educational; he had a music academy on Pilgrim Street where he taught piano, organ and harmony. In 1886 Durham University conferred upon him a FCO & Musical Doctorate and in May 1889 he received a public testimonial in recognition of his services in the cultivation and spread of music in the North of England. The idea originated with members of Newcastle Amateur Vocal Society in recognition of his many years as their conductor but it afterwards assumed a more widely representative character owing to a desire of many friends outside the circle of the Society to participate in doing honour to an eminent musician who had done so much for musical culture in the district of his adoption. The presentation was made by Alderman Jonathan Barker Ellis, who had worked closely with Dr Rea, as Chairman of the People's Concerts Committee.

William Rea must have met with some opposition when he first came to Newcastle from London, not least perhaps from the Phil-Harmonic Society. I can find no evidence of this but its members would not have taken kindly to this Londoner with his preference for German music hustling in on their territory, giving lectures at the Literary and Philosophical Society on Mozart, Beethoven and Weber, and recitals of modern piano music. The thought of Wagner ringing out over the Bigg Market must have filled them with horror. Their concerts were

exclusive civilised affairs, with the right people attending and now here was this London fellow starting up something called Promenade Concerts in the Town Hall with an orchestra made up of musicians from Her Majesty's Theatre, the Royal Italian Opera Covent Garden and the London Popular Concerts, and any Tom, Dick or Harry was being admitted at the door for just sixpence. Not only that but he was doing all the organising, conducting, playing the piano and managing to get late running trains laid on to places like Sunderland and South Shields to coincide with the finishing times of his concerts. As though these evening concerts were not enough he was proposing additional Morning Performances on Saturdays at 2.30 pm for workers and tradespeople, who are, by the very nature of their working hours unable to make the evening performances. Here was a man who was determined that everyone in the town should enjoy music and it should not be the exclusive preserve of the 'better off' citizens in the town as it had been up to the point of his arrival.

These Grand Classical and Promenade Concerts and later Weekly Popular Concerts, held between 1867 and 1873 were financed by subscriptions and a notice in one of the early programmes gives a clue as to their organisation. It reads as follows:

*'A committee of gentlemen are desirous to initiate a weekly series of concerts in the New Town Hall during the months of November and December. In order to produce these in a manner which shall be worthy of Public Patronage it is proposed to issue subscription tickets for a series of six concerts at the following moderate charges;*

*Family Reserved Seat Tickets, to admit Four Persons to the Serie..£1 1s 0d  
Single Reserved Seat Tickets, for the Series....£0 7s 6d*

*As soon as sufficient number of subscribers shall be obtained the committee will be prepared to make engagements with the very best available talent.*

*The entire musical arrangements will be under the superintendence of Mr Rea, Organist to the Corporation. The promotees of these concerts urge upon all interested in the culture of Music in this town, and the moral and social elevations of the masses, to support this endeavour to provide a First Class Musical Entertainment, that shall be within reach of all classes of the Public.'*

The first of the Promenade Concerts held in 1867 had an early 19<sup>th</sup> century flavour with the usual mixture of song and orchestral pieces but as the season progressed Rea introduced, between the ballads – symphonies, by Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, and other works by Gounod, Meyerbeer, Auber etc. These concerts proved very popular and the programme for the last concert of the season had to include a notice to the effect that it was '*Positively the Last Night!*' In 1871 he instituted an all Beethoven night and an all Mendelssohn programme and to balance it he had an Offenbach/Strauss evening. In 1872 he

introduced Wagner for the first time in Newcastle. And so these concerts continued until 1873 with Mr Rea taking a leading role and continually introducing new works into his interesting and varied programmes.

Some idea of the occasion when Dr Rea introduced his Promenade Concerts in Newcastle can be gleaned from the press report of 4<sup>th</sup> February 1867, following the first concert.

*(Dr Rea held the) 'First of a series of orchestral promenade concerts in the Town Hall inaugurating a project which he has long had at heart and taking a step deserving of every encouragement and success and to say the least of it, most courageous. A strong well-balanced company of artists have been engaged. His intentions are to give concerts nightly for one month and it remains to be seen whether there is in the district that taste for high-class music, skilfully and harmoniously rendered to repay the necessary trouble and anxiety – Whether in fact there will be such audiences as to make financially successful what, in itself may be predicted a thorough success and whether the immediate effect will be the establishment of an orchestral society consisting of a picked number of our local musicians. Nothing of its kind could have been better and certainly nothing of its kind would have given greater relish and satisfaction than did the concert of last night.'*

The review went on to say that there was an audience numerous and fashionable and anything if not appreciative and *they did not scruple in the bestowal of their applause*. The hall was tastefully decorated with flags, banners and trophies bearing the names of the great masters and a refreshment stall had been opened.

Following a later concert in the autumn of that same year the press reported that from the moment the doors were opened there was a constant stream of people. Mostly season ticket holders but the demand had exceeded the supply and there had been a limit put on them so that some parts of the hall could be available to the general public. These areas were the gallery and the rear of the area, presumably downstairs. It was reported that the limited number of tickets available caused disappointment *'but the mortification they at present experience will not be without its advantages if it teaches the danger of procrastination and lead them on a future occasion to take time by the forelocks and secure their tickets at an early period'*.

I am sure that many reader's will have already latched onto the fact that Rea's Promenade Concerts were thirty years ahead of Henry Wood's and further comparisons would disclose many similar features between the two. I would hesitate to suggest, however, that Promenade concerts were Mr Rea's idea, they were not, and the concept had been around for some time. One outside force that influenced change in this direction was Johann Strauss, senior, when he visited England with his orchestra in 1838 and toured the country widely,

although I can find no evidence that he performed in Newcastle. However, his influence together with that of his French equivalent, Philippe Musard (1793-1859) who introduced Promenade concerts into Paris in 1833 and Louis Antoine Jullien, must have been instrumental in the introduction of Promenade Concerts in general. Jullien and his orchestra did perform in Newcastle in January 1857 at the Theatre Royal, Grey Street, billed as 'Mon. Jullien and his Unrivalled Band'. Jullien was a sort of 19<sup>th</sup> century pop idol. He had about two dozen Christian names having been named after all the members of the local philharmonic orchestra in his hometown of Sisteron. He introduced the Polka to England and Queen Victoria was not amused, but she should have been flattered in 1845 when Jullien and an orchestra of five hundred played 'her tune' at Covent Garden with a cannon shot in each bar. Jullien made a fortune from music but died in poverty and lunacy. Notwithstanding all this, Mr Rea had some original ideas and they did not go unnoticed outside the town, as the following contemporary newspaper report testifies:

*'It may be perhaps gratifying to the subscribers to learn that the Annual Series of Orchestral Concerts in Newcastle are now exciting considerable attention in musical circles in London, and that Glasgow, Edinbro' and Greenock are beginning to avail themselves of the services of the Orchestra organised by Mr Rea, and are following in the wake of Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Mr Rea has no hesitation in affirming that better concerts than those which have been given during the last month have seldom been heard either out of or in the Metropolis. In confirmation of this he begs to refer his patrons to the list of works performed, and to remind them of the highly finished performances of such excessively complicated works as the Power of Sound (Spohr), the Scotch Symphony, the Pastoral Symphony, &c., &c.'*

The article concludes with a list of the orchestral works performed in the third series of these concerts which includes Beethoven symphonies 1,2,4,5 and 6, Haydn's 'Surprise', Mendelssohn's 'Italian', 'Reformation' and 'Scotch' and many overtures, marches, waltzes and operatic selections by other leading composers. William Rea had literally overnight, and single handedly, changed the concert scene in Newcastle.

William Rea died shortly after 11 o'clock on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1903 at his home at No 7 Summerhill Grove at the top of Westgate Hill and was laid to rest in Jesmond Old Cemetery. On his death the following appeared in the Newcastle Daily Journal: -

*'When William Rea came to Newcastle it could hardly be said that it was a musical town, and indeed it would be scarcely the truth to say that the arduous labours on which he entered with enthusiasm and with persistent effort met with such appreciative response they deserved. In those days it was a common matter of reproach that Newcastle cared so little for music that no high-class concert paid and consequently that accomplished artistes fought shy of the*

*place. If in the last quarter of a century there has been a distinct change and if Newcastle has now, to a large extent, thrown off that record, much is due to the talents and the energy of Dr Rea ... He came to us, work-a-day community, distinctly behind-hand in the appreciation of the fine arts, because we had not had time, in the busy, bustling middle of the century, to think much about these things. He set himself the task of teaching the people to understand and appreciate good music, and assuredly, his labours have, in no slight degree, met their reward'*

Three years after his death, his two sons, Charles Herbert and William Cecil, had a memorial headstone erected in memory of their father and the occasion was marked by a piece in the Newcastle Daily Chronicle on February 3<sup>rd</sup>.

*'There has just been erected by his sons in the old Jesmond Cemetery a very interesting memorial to the late Dr William Rea, the eminent musician. This is a beautiful headstone 7 feet in height with a bronze medallion, life size surrounded by a wreath very artistically treated followed by an inscription in memory of Dr Rea and Mrs Rea and their 2 children who died young. The stone, which is a fine block of hard Portland limestone and which will retain its whiteness has been designed by Mr Rob North architect of Cliffords Inn and is based upon 18<sup>th</sup> century work. The relief in bronze is by that eminent and distinguished sculptor, Mr Frank Derwent Wood, the aim being simple in design. The work was executed in London and sent in finished state. The memorial of Dr Rea will interest and will be much admired by his many friends and pupils who benefited so largely from his earnest and unselfish labours to cultivate a taste for classical ideas in music and to whom so many in the city and surroundings owe a great debt of gratitude for much of the advanced interest in the divine art.'*

The piece went on to give a description of the details engraved on a memorial head stone, which are as follows:

In Loving Memory of  
WILLIAM REA. MUS. DOC.  
Who devoted more than 40 years to cultivate a love of good music amongst the  
People of this City.  
Born, March 25<sup>th</sup> 1827; died March 8<sup>th</sup> 1903  
And of his dearly beloved wife  
EMMA MARY  
Daughter of Wesley Stoker Woolhouse F.R.A.S.  
Born April 7<sup>th</sup> 1835; died May 6<sup>th</sup> 1893  
Also their dear children who died in 1861  
ELEANOR GERTRUDE on March 10 aged six years  
EMMA BEATRICE on March 13 aged three years  
  
The souls of the righteous are in the hands of God.  
Wisdom, chap 3.

In a cemetery now largely overgrown and unattended William Rea's gravestone, lies, broken in two halves; the only memorial to this outstanding musician, who dedicated the greater part of his life to sustaining some form of musical culture in the North East for the benefit of everyone. His overall contribution to the cultural life of the city has not yet been acknowledged by the City of Newcastle and I feel this is long overdue.

## CHAPTER EIGHT

### THE PEOPLE'S CONCERTS

William Rea was anything but a musical snob. If we take his Weekly Popular Concerts, which were held amongst other reasons for the *moral and social elevation of the masses* we can see that his aim was to bring music to everyone and he was given an opportunity to do this through the People's Concerts that were started in Newcastle in 1881. The idea of having concerts for the ordinary people, was not Rea's alone, concerts for the people was a concept that had been around since the 1840s in England and Europe, but it needed someone to stir the Newcastle Town Council into action and I suspect that that someone was William Rea. However, the whole question of People's Concerts remained a controversial issue so far as the Council was concerned; whilst some members were in favour others were not and this was best summed up in 1908 by one member of the Council, who said that when he joined the Council, three years earlier, he had been astounded at the ludicrous spirit in which the Council had viewed the subject. It was a farce and seemed that the concerts were being carried out as the fad of one individual or individuals. The Council, however, were quick to take the credit at the early stages when the idea proved to be a success. But for the full inside story we need to delve into the Minutes of the Council Committee Meetings for the period 1880 – 1920.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> June 1880 a Musical Committee was convened by the Council to consider information submitted from various boroughs where organ recitals and other performances were held. After careful consideration it was unanimously agreed that the present arrangements with Mr Rea were unsatisfactory and that they should go for more popular musical performances in the Town Hall. Mr Rea was invited to put forward his views in writing as to the manner in which the public of Newcastle could be provided with more attractive music and how it should be arranged. It was subsequently agreed that he should have free use of the Town Hall Concert Rooms and Organ for a certain number of evenings for popular concerts, which the Council would control. Mr Rea would organise things but he would still remain the Council Organist. By 1882 the concerts were up and running. They proved successful and showed a profit. At this stage the Council thought it appropriate to thank the Musical Committee chairman for the great zeal he had displayed in inaugurating and carrying on so successfully the Saturday Evening Corporation Concerts (as they were known at that time) which had proved a source of so much enjoyment to all classes of the community. All on the committee agreed. The concert series were subject to approval each year by the committee but otherwise Mr Rea did everything and it all ran smoothly under his

direction. That is until 1888 when he was told in so many words by the committee not to anticipate their approval but to curtail his enthusiasm and await the committee's instructions. That same month Mr Rea tendered his resignation from the Council' employment, which was accepted by the Council. The committee concluded that in the circumstances he '*could not be had*' for the Peoples Concerts and they appointed Mr Hirschmann, who ran a piano shop in town.

Up to 1890 the concerts were still in credit, but by 1892 it was noticed that artists fees were exceeding expenses and one Council member complained that exorbitant prices were being paid for professional artists. (More than one Amateur Society had bankrupted itself over professional artists fees) and the committee became divided as to the continuance of the concert series. One source of contention was that the Music in the Park's Committee had creamed off the profits made at the People's Concerts to pay for Sunday band concerts in public parks. By 1896 full blown committee rows were taking place with the anti-concert lobby pointing out that several large rate payers made their living out of giving concerts and the Corporation had no right to take away their source of livelihood by giving cheap concerts subsidised from local taxes. The pro-concert lobby pointed out that the Council had a duty to make brighter and better lives for the people they represented and that there were hundreds of causes in Newcastle where they were spending money for which in one sense they got no return. It was further pointed out that private enterprise in Newcastle had so far done nothing for the musical education of the Newcastle people (resounding Hear! Hear!) and it was the People's Concerts that had stirred public enterprise to do its duty. Parallels were drawn with Leeds and Birmingham and it was pointed out that prior to the introduction of the People's Concerts in Newcastle there had been the same second-rate class of concert from year's end to year's end. This was not entirely true but it was make or break time. Fortunately the decision was in favour of the concerts continuing for another season at least.

The debt continued to rise, however, and in 1903 an unnamed public benefactor sent a cheque for a substantial sum to help reduce the deficit but it only made matters worse. The committee chairman accepted it but the Mayor was livid and considered it humiliating. He said the Council could not possibly accept and instructed the City Treasurer to give it back .to the Gentleman concerned. Further heated discussions over finance ensued but in the end reason prevailed with one member pointing out that the Council should provide 'good' music for the public to elevate and educate the people and if they didn't they would simply find themselves in competition with the music halls, A dissenting voice countered with, '*the poorer people for whom these concerts were originally intended are no longer attending and those that are, are better off and could afford to pay more*' And so the arguments went on and the concert seasons continued but there was that feeling in the air that perhaps they had outlived their purpose. However, like all public institutions once established it proves more difficult to do away with them. Committee meetings became ever stormier with one councillor even invoking the British Empire in his oration when

he said that in all other large centres of population in the great (British) empire, the authorities were devoting very large sums of money to this special object; and that they practically pledged themselves as citizens to do so. He went on to point out that for those of them who were temperance reformers there was no better influence that could be exerted to promote sobriety in the habits of the people than the encouragement of music of this sort and he would like to see the movement extended. The series did trundle on but was probably a casualty of the Great War. I was denied access to the Council Minutes for part of the latter period - the books are considered too fragile for handling by the public - but by August 1918 the minutes show that consideration was being given to handing over the south end of the Town Hall Concert Room to the Food Control Department and the north end of the hall to the requirements of the Coal Rationing Department. In other words it was agreed that the Town Council take steps to make best possible arrangements for the fullest use of the Town Hall Concert Room! By 1920, Council Minutes were beginning to reflect the dilapidated state of the Concert Room, which it was said was unfit for public gatherings. The magazine 'Musical Times' reported in one of their 1920 issues on the lack of concert hall facilities in Newcastle upon Tyne.

We have some idea of the content of People's Concerts, which reflects the limited finances put initially at Mr Rea's disposal. They quite obviously could not stretch to an orchestra and so the early programmes mostly comprised songs, organ solos by William Rea, glees and violin and *'clarionette'* solos. In 1883 they managed performances of Handel's 'Messiah' and Haydn's 'Creation'. In 1886 they presented Handel's 'Judas Maccabeus' and in 1895, Rossini's 'Stabat Mater'. At other concerts there were scenes from operas. From the sparse information available it would seem that by 1901/1902 the Corporation was inviting good quality singers to perform at these concerts. The French/Canadian soprano, Miss Zelig de Lussan sang and Joseph O'Mara, the Irish tenor, both outstanding artists of their day. In 1902 the American soprano, Miss Ellen Beech Yaw, came and was billed as the 'Highest Soprano in the World', which was no idle boast as she could skyrocket an octave above high C. She was also known as Lark Ellen, or the Californian Nightingale and said to have the highest vocal range in history. How all this went down in the Bigg Market at these People's Concerts we are left to imagine. Perhaps press reports hold a clue as to the behaviour of audiences at these concerts in Newcastle. In Leeds for instance, behaviour was not of the best, where there was shouting from the gallery and resounding calls of Hear! Hear! when some well known soprano sang the sentimental Victorian ballad 'Home Sweet Home' with its throat catching line 'There's no place like home', guaranteed to reduce any audience to tears. In 1903 the Meister Glee Singers entertained and then there was the London Concert Party featuring Leslie Harris' Society Entertainers and so the concerts continued with the emphasis remaining firmly on song. Whether or not Rea resigned his position because of differences with the Music Committee over the concert arrangements we may never know but what we know of the level of entertainment at these concerts it may well have been that they fell below his

acceptable standards and he got out before he was called upon to entertain the gallery by playing popular tunes on the Town Hall organ. Whatever the reason it hardly matters now, the main thing is that in their day these concerts broke down musical barriers. Although they were called People's Concerts they were never intended for the working class only but more to bring together different social classes in the same building if not in the same seats. The better off still occupied the better seats and the working class were stuck in the gallery, but the concerts did symbolise community and shared experience, which after all was very important for the towns imagine.

## CHAPTER NINE

### THE MUSICAL THEATRES

Before exploring the musical aspect of Newcastle's theatres let us pause again to consider what sort of town Newcastle had become by the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It was the dawning of the Industrial age and outstanding personalities such as George and Robert Stephenson, William Armstrong and the Hawthorn brothers amongst others were making their mark. John Dobson and Richard Grainger a new breed of architect and builder were transforming Newcastle from a town of half timbered and brick construction into a modern city of classic proportions that would rank with the most handsome cities in Europe. Industry was flourishing and between 1800 and 1850 the population of the town doubled – within a century from 1793 the population of Northumberland and Durham expanded from 300,000 to 1,800,000. The principal cause of this was the growth of industries such as mining, shipbuilding and other engineering occupations. This hurricane pace of growth created evil living conditions far beyond the capacity the public authorities or private enterprise or the workers themselves could handle. The conditions in which the majority lived were unimaginatively sordid. At the other end of the social scale were the industrialists and the commercial classes who by reason of their wealth and their control of economic life came to dominate local society and culture. They wanted to be seen to extend their creations to the poorer classes but it too often came across as patronising and moralizing and their attempts to promote art and classical, or high class, music under their terms largely failed.

Another factor was the growing perception by the general public of classical music being not so much enjoyable and entertaining as the preserve of longhaired eccentrics. The well-known image of the maestro of this period with his wild hair and unpronounceable foreign name did little to dispel this view. The idea that 'serious' music was something to be listened to in wrapped silence and then analysed and discussed in the most knowledgeable terms was not for uneducated man. Later still in the Victorian era the nature of many of the choral compositions with their ponderous music, semi-religious overtones and heavy moral messages seemed to be in opposition to the often irreverent and bawdy songs of local music halls, which were so popular with the larger body of ordinary folk. It was thought by the 'enlightened' members of society that music of the 'right' kind had a certain moral value and even outside church it could be a means of inspiring the workers towards virtuous and productive lives. But this only served to widen the gap. In spite of all this the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw a growing appetite for music amongst the public in general and in the early part of the

century at least the divide between serious listening and popular entertainment was not so marked; there was not yet a wide gulf between the two. The same people, on the whole, enjoyed both and this would perhaps have been nowhere better reflected than in the early theatres of Newcastle.

Harold Oswald in his book 'The Theatres Royal in Newcastle upon Tyne' said in the introduction that the first theatrical presentations in Newcastle were at the Moot Hall and then at the Turks Head Long Room, known as the Theatre in the Bigg Market. It became the headquarters of drama for forty years but there would have been music also as the following extract from the Newcastle Chronicle of 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1774 shows:

*'At the theatre in the Bigg Market on Friday it being April 8 will be performed a concert of music...*

*Between the parts of the concert will be presented (gratis) a tragedy called "Hamlet, Prince of Denmark"'*

**The Theatre Royal, Mosley Street** opened its doors to the public in 1788 and presented comic opera together with straight drama and the occasional concert. In March 1819 there was a grand miscellaneous concert of selections from Handel's sacred oratorios interposed between the play 'She Stoops to Conquer' and 'The Innkeeper's Daughter' and seven days later another concert of sacred music was sandwiched between 'The Stranger' and an operetta, called 'The Rendezvous'. Earlier the theatre had mounted a performance of 'Guy Mannering'; a play with music. The handbill for the performance states, *'To conclude with the favourite Scotch AIR. "Auld Lang Syne"*. These plays with music, which served as English opera at this period were very elastic, usually the singer taking part, who probably also had a hand in the acting, introduced or cut out musical numbers according to his own individual requirements and thought nothing of suspending the dramatic action of the play and interpolating a few ballads of his own choice. There is a story associated with the tenor, Braham, in a performance of 'Guy Mannering', where having reached the last dramatic scene, set in a cave, he discovered a grand piano in there, and exclaimed "A piano! That reminds me of a delightful aria I heard at La Scala the other night" – A cue for a song if ever there was one. In 1813 on 30<sup>th</sup> November, a Grand Concert was held at which Signor Rivolta *'exhibited his wonderful performance'* on the Pandean Pipes, Spanish Guitar, Triangle, Harmonica, Tabor, Chinese Crescent, Cymbals and Bass Drum. The audience were reassured in writing on the notice advertising Signor Rivolta's concert that *'The Theatre will be well aired during the previous week'*, probably essential in those 'pre-deodorant' days. A later handbill tells us of a forthcoming performance by Miss Rose of Dublin, who will – *'exert her distinguished talents in the vocal department'*. On 19<sup>th</sup> February 1823 tragedy struck and seven people were crushed to death in the ensuing panic following a false fire alarm during a performance. But the theatre soon reopened its doors to the public on 15<sup>th</sup> December 1824 with a performance of the opera, 'Der Freischutz' by Weber. This performance was only three years

after its premier in Berlin and only five months after its premier in London, where that same year the opera had resulted in a Freischutz craze with four, possibly five, different versions being given. We cannot be sure which version reached the Theatre Royal, Mosley Street and might even have been the English version by 'Septimus Globus', which was entitled, 'Der Freischutz, a new muse-sick-all and see-nick performance from the new German uproar by the celebrated Funnybear.'

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries the musical stage in Newcastle would have comprised mostly light-hearted plays shot through with musical numbers. Marital mix-ups, rustic romances and mythological subjects were favourite topics. The music performed in these productions may not have been original; there was a tendency to use popular musical numbers. William Shield was making an art of this in his successful productions at Covent Garden in London. There were various names for this sort of entertainment; burlesques, burlettas, comic operas etc.; in 1837 at the newly opened Theatre Royal on Grey Street, one presentation was advertised as a lightly popular mythological, operatical classical burlesque *Burletta! Italian opera* did not come to Newcastle theatres until the mid century but when it arrived it proved very popular as did the rather risqué French musical farces of the time. These performances of opera and lighter fare would have been of a high standard for the times as there was no stinting on the artists presented. Particularly in the performances of Italian Opera the world's greatest singers were often to be heard. In the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century the great singers in opera were idolised as footballers and pop stars are today. Generally speaking standards improved when London touring companies began taking over from the old stock company system of presentations and by the late Victorian Era the musical side of Newcastle's theatre life would have been the equal of anywhere in the country outside the capital.

**The Theatre Royal, Grey Street**, opened on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1837 (Mosley Street theatre closed 25<sup>th</sup> June 1836) and the production mounted on 1<sup>st</sup> March could be said to have set the pattern for what was to follow; two performances a night with a play followed by a musical item and then an afterpiece – a farce with music. On that opening night the play was 'Pizarro' or 'The Spaniards' with a host of characters playing Spaniards and Peruvians and a bevy of young ladies as Virgins of the Sun. A Grand Overture followed and then the musical farce 'Rosina'. This was the story, based upon Charles Simon Favart's '*Les moissonneurs*' (1768). on which William Shield had based his opera 'Rosina' and probably this was a production of the same but no mention is made of Shield on the handbill. By the 1840s there were oratorio performances taking place in the theatre and a series of promenade concerts, as previously mentioned, was mounted without success. It is interesting to note, however, that these concerts preceded the visit of Mon. Jullien and his unrivalled band, and Dr William Rea by many years. In spite of the disinterest Newcastle always appears to have shown in matters cultural, its musical history shows that in some respects it was the equal of many larger provincial towns in the country. In 1848 Newcastle heard

the Swedish Nightingale, Jenny Lind in Bellini's, 'La Sonnambula'. Those who attended were fortunate as Lind's affair with the theatre lasted only a few seasons. She quit the theatre for religious reasons. This was followed in 1854 by a season of Italian opera featuring the famous Italian soprano, Giulia Grisi and her tenor husband, Giovanni Matteo Mario. Grisi once got a backhanded compliment from Jenny Lind, who never spoke well of any singer, but then she never acknowledged any powers superior to her own. Mario was for thirty years the world's ranking tenor. He was an aristocrat and the son of an army general. He trained for a career in the military academy and had such misgivings about the propriety of becoming a singer that he forever only signed himself Mario. There was more than one London based Italian Opera at this time and these performances with Grisi and Mario would have been with the Royal Italian Opera, Covent Garden, then under the direction of Mr Gye.

The 1870s saw a blossoming of musical productions at the Theatre Royal with all manner of touring companies presenting the full range of musical theatre from opera to musicals. Ladies companies were to the fore with Miss Emily Soldene's Celebrated Opera Co., Madame Selina Dolaro's Comic Opera Co., Miss Kate Santley's London Opera Co., and Madlle. D'Anka and her Specially Organised London Opera-Bouffe Co. and Miss Florence St. John and her Comic Opera Co. They presented, together with Mrs Liston's Celebrated London Opera Co. light, frothy, naughty French operettas such as Lecocq's 'Girofle Girofla'. 'La Fille de Madame Angot' and 'Les Pres Saint Gervais'. The plots usually dealt with young French sexual problems or as one reviewer put it '*in which the lady of the title went through the pursued damsel routine with libidinous gallantry*'. By the end of the 1860s Opera-Bouffe had caught on in England, having had its best days in France. More first rate Italian opera was being presented with further performances by the Royal Italian Opera of Covent Garden that included 'Faust' (Gounod), 'Dinorah' (Meyerbeer), 'Fra Diavolo' (Auber), 'Don Giovanni' (Mozart) and 'Il Trovatore' (Verdi). Another opera company was presenting twelve nights of operettas by Offenbach and apiece called 'POM', a new and original comic opera with peasants, Indians and bridesmaids, by P Buealossi (since confined to obscurity). The most interesting aspect of this production is that it was conducted by E.W.D. Goossens, a Belgian, born 1845 in Bruges. He settled in England and founded the Goossen's Dynasty. The printed programme informs us that '*In the grand Incidental ballet in the second act of 'POM' Madlle SIDONE, Premier Danseuse from the principal Continental Theatres, will have the honour of making her First Appearance in Newcastle*'. Madame Sidone was the conductor's wife and would later become the grandmother of Eugene III; conductor and composer, Leon; oboist, Sidonie and Marie; harpists and Adolphe; horn player, who was killed in the Great War.

Still more musical productions took place during the course of the 1880s including yet another performance of William Shield's 'Rosina', described as a pastoral opera. This is obviously the production referred to in Charleton's 'Newcastle Town' (1885) when he says, '*The latter (Rosina) is his (Shield)*

*masterpiece and was lately performed in Newcastle under very interesting circumstances. The scene of it is laid at Swalwell, his (Shield) native place, and its music is most charmingly simple and pastoral in character. Many of the songs will live as long as Englishmen love music, in proof of which we need only mention the names of "Old Towler", "The Heaving of the Lead", "The Wolf" and "The Thorn". They rank with the songs of Purcell, Bishop and Arne, as being so thoroughly endowed with the spirit of English life and feeling'. Mr D'Oyly Carte's Opera Co. began giving performances of Gilbert and Sullivan and he also joined Charles Wyndham in presenting other operatic works under the banner of the Olivette Opera Co. Miss Kate Santley, already mentioned above, the daughter of the famous English baritone, Sir Charles Santley (1834 – 1922), was an enduring favourite and her company appeared over many seasons. Light opera continued to pull in the crowds through 1888 and 1889 and there were ever new opera companies presenting new comedy operas and burlesques such as 'The Nauch Girl' (or 'The Rajah of Chutneypore') On a more serious level there were the one-off performances such as the Grand Complimentary Concert for Mr J.H.Beers (one of the towns leading musicians) put on by *the elite of the Musical Circles of Newcastle and Neighbourhood*, On the whole though, Newcastle's theatres were geared up to the best in musical entertainment (I have always considered opera to be a theatrical entertainment) In 1886 two hopefuls Van Biene and Horace Lingard, under the guise of the Comic Opera Co., put on an opera they had composed called 'Falka', which the theatre bills claimed, had notched up 1000 performances by 8<sup>th</sup> April 1886. Such claims were common place in the theatre and reading the old handbills can be a great source of amusement as well as interest. 'Powerful' was a favourite adjective in Newcastle theatre handbills and posters – usually applied to the chorus, as though there were some need to reassure audiences that they would be able to hear them. One company went so far as to reassure theatregoers that the orchestra would play efficiently – giving the impression that most pit orchestras of the day were a shambles. By 1883 theatre programmes were beginning to point out to patrons that the *Electric Bell* would ring in the Royal Bars 3 minutes before curtain up. That was progress. The 1890s began to see a change in the kind of musical show put on in the theatre; a new look appeared on the playbills of the Theatre Royal, which was due largely to the fact that English language musicals were beginning to make an impact on the world of musical theatre, not only in England but across Europe.*

The impact came from London and mostly from the theatres run by that legendary producer, George Edwardes, known to all as 'The Guv'ner'. The basic plots and scheme of things in his musical shows were not so different from those that had been presented before but instead of fictitious and mythical characters from the past he peopled his shows with up to date characters, recognisable modern types who spoke in up-to-date language and wore clothes that were the height of fashion in the early years of the decade. The first of Edwardes' presentations at the Theatre Royal in 1893 was 'In Town' It was nowhere as sophisticated as these shows were to become, but it was the beginning of

Musical Comedy as we came to know it and proved a success in Newcastle as did the London Gaiety Co. itself, which was to return over many more seasons. Opera seasons appeared to fall off slightly as the century closed but before we leave the Theatre Royal of the 'Naughty Nineties' and make our way to other theatres in town we might allow ourselves a peak into the next century, when a dashing young man, whose father had made a fortune from selling Beecham's Pills, came in October 1910 with his Opera Comique Co. and an orchestra of forty musicians and one hundred artist under the direction of a young conductor, Hamish MacCunn, and presented for the first time in Newcastle, two brilliant musical productions; 'Tales of Hoffmann' by Offenbach and 'A Viennese Masquerade' by Johann Strauss. No, not a forgotten Strauss gem but an English version of *Die Fledermaus*.

The Journal for November 18th 1910 reported:

*'The Beecham Season at the Newcastle Theatre Royal has fulfilled our highest expectations and the public has displayed so much enthusiasm over the two charming examples of opera comique that I think we are justified in calling upon Mr Thomas Quinlan to redeem his promise and pay us a return visit. Perhaps it will be found possible to extend the repertoire on a subsequent visit, this weeks audience have certainly proved the demand for light, dainty, tuneful music when it is capably presented'*

This reflects the enthusiasm of the town's theatre goers and music lovers, who had probably been smitten by the George Edwardes presentation, two years earlier, of the sensational play with music (as it was then described) 'The Merry Widow' by Franz Lehar. This was to prove the most famous of all operettas. First produced in Vienna in 1905 and only one year after its first presentation in Newcastle it would chalk up 18,000 performances worldwide with 1,365 of them in England. It would have been translated into thirteen languages and produced in thirty countries including Turkey, Persia, Japan, China Hindustan and Serbia. It should come as no surprise, therefore, to read that it was repeated at the Theatre Royal for the next two seasons and probably more, and was the first of a spate of plays with music, from the Continent, that would become known under the generic title, Viennese Operetta and provide the music world with some of the most beautiful melodies ever written. Italian Opera, however, was not entirely dead and at The Royal in April 1912, Sig. Cavaliere Castellano and his Italian Opera Co was presenting a short season. But what might be generally regarded as the home of opera in Newcastle was not The Royal but the Tyne Theatre and Opera House on Westgate Road.

**The Tyne Theatre** opened its doors on 23<sup>rd</sup> September 1867 and for half a century thereafter would serve as the town' Opera House. In a general survey of opera theatre, limited as it is here to a few paragraphs, it is difficult to decide which is the more important - the opera or the singers. In the case of the Tyne Theatre it was both. Within a few years of the theatre's opening the world

famous Opera Impresario, Colonel J. H. Mapleson was presenting his Italian Opera Co featuring Therese Tietjens, possibly the greatest dramatic soprano of her time, Christine Nilsson, the Swedish soprano, the French mezzo, Zelia Trebelli and the Italian tenor, Allesandro Bettini, in a wide selection of operas including, 'Norma' and 'Lucrezia Borgia' (Bellini), 'Il Trovatore' and 'Rigoletto' (Verdi) and 'Faust' (Gounod). Other singers and operas performed were Charles Santley in Wagner's 'Flying Dutchman' (first Newcastle performance) and arguably Santley's greatest operatic role, and Sims Reeves in Donizetti's Lucia de Lammasoor, with Mde. Belle Cole, the noted Tyneside contralto. . There were also performances of 'Les Huguenots' by Meyerbeer and Audrans's 'Black Domino'. In February 1895 there was a performance of Arthur Sullivan's comic opera 'The Chieftain', which had only had its premier in London some four months earlier. The Carl Rosa Opera, who had presented Charles Santley in the Flying Dutchman also, gave a first performance of The 'Jewels of the Madonna' by Wolf-Ferrari. This violent story of jealousy and revenge in Southern Italy had only been given its first London performance a year earlier, which is another example of how well Newcastle was served with opera in the period up to the First World War. Carl Rosa was a German violinist and a gifted combination of musician and businessman. He started his first touring English opera company in 1872. Three main elements contributed to Rosa's success as an operatic impresario; his ability to spot embryonic operatic stars, his inspired programme building – mixing old and new, classical with popular - and his introduction of subscription tickets at all prices. He died in 1889 but his company carried on.

During this period Italian opera was the craze and was what the 'fashionables' wanted to hear. English opera on the other hand, came and went – venture after venture failed. The truth of the matter was that there was no comparison between the works produced by British composers of the time and the operas of Bellini, Donizetti, Rossini, Weber and not least, Verdi. There was also the fact that the Italian singers (although they were not all Italians) were excellent and it was not possible for any English singer to enter their ranks. It was this that made the two English singers mentioned above, Charles Santley and Sims Reeves, so outstanding in their day; They refused to adopt phoney Italian stage names and through sheer determination broke into the field of Italian opera and continued to hold there own amongst their Italian counterparts. Both singers appeared often in Newcastle but Sims Reeves must have had a special affection for the town, as it was in Newcastle that he made his stage debut in 1838 or 1839 at the Theatre Royal, Grey St., in the musical play, 'Guy Mannering'. As previously mentioned, singers doubled as actors in these early days and the other way around, and a very young Reeves possibly got the part because he could sing as well as act. However, it was as a singer that he would triumphantly return many times and on one of these occasions in 1865/66, at a time when he was in such great demand in the provinces, Newcastle showed its delight on his arrival by greeting him with '*a merry peel of bells*' from the steeple of St Nicholas'.

In 1887 Augustus Harris took over the lease of the Tyne Theatre and managed it until his untimely death at age forty-six years in 1896. He had a Knighthood conferred upon him 1891. He brought with him from the Theatre Royal Drury Lane, where he had been manager for eight years, many of his stars including those of the Royal Italian Opera Co. During this period under Harris' management the theatre thrived. But the local amateurs were not denied the theatre and in 1897 The Newcastle upon Tyne Operatic Co put on a performance of the comic opera 'Dorothy' by Alfred Cellier. This was another of those musicals billed as having clocked up one thousand performances in London and a staggering three thousand performances in the provinces. But, in Dorothy's case it was no idle boast because the lady turned out to be London's longest running 19<sup>th</sup> century musical ahead of each and everyone of the Gilbert and Sullivan works and ahead of anything that would be presented in the last fifteen years of the century. Peering into the 20<sup>th</sup> century as we did with the Theatre Royal, the pantomime of 1906 starred Harry Lauder and Jose Collins, two of the great stars of the early years of the century. The Moody-Manners Opera Co were paying a return visit in October 1905 with their production of 'Tannhauser' and 'Faust' with the well known Irish tenor, Joseph O'Mara. The Quinlan Opera Co. in a marvellous piece of timing gave a complete performance of the Ring Cycle by Wagner in March 1913. It was the first and only time it had been done in Newcastle – a year later and it might never have taken place, as Wagner became *persona non grata*. Quinlan was putting on The Ring Cycle following the expiration of the rights that had previously prevented Wagner's dramas being produced and performed outside Germany without payment. As a result of this there was talk of the cost of tickets being from as little as 6d (two and a half new pence) upwards. This resulted in a piece in the press that read '*Mr Quinlan has promised to give the best performances within his power at the lowest prices but could not see his way to clearly ruining his reputation by cutting down the cost of the presentation so that he could charge from 6d upwards*' The Tyne Theatre, itself, was to become a victim of the First World War period and its doors were finally closed in March 1919.

As the wealthier patrons made their way in their carriages to the Theatre Royal and the Tyne Theatre to hear the Italian Opera or see the latest musical from London they would hardly have noticed the poorly dressed faceless creatures shuffling along the pavements under the yellow glow of the gas lamps, their heads bowed against the freezing wind and rain, wending their way to one or other of the Geordie Music Halls situated close by in what is today fashionably called Grainger Town. These unfortunate creatures at the bottom of the social scale would have been in search of a night's enjoyment in the comparative warmth and comfort of the Music Hall. Greater part of the working class population at this time would never have attended a formal concert, except perhaps the Corporation People's Concerts in the Town Hall, and although some would have gone to the Theatre Royal and the Tyne Theatre, to see the latest shows they would have formed a separate audience isolated from the well to do; admitted via the side street door, directed up an endless stone stairway, and then

herded together on hard wooden benches under the roof of the theatre in what is (or was) called 'The Gods'. My granny, a typical Victorian, used to sit and sing to herself after a sip or two of beer. Unwittingly she introduced me, as a child to a number of Music Hall songs; *'Come, come, come and make eyes at me down by the Old Bull and Bush, tara-la la la'* and *'My old man said follow the van and don't dilly dally on the way'* and a song called, *'A Bicycle Made for Two'*, which went, *'Daisy, Daisy, give me your answer do, I'm half crazy just for the love of you. – It won't be a stylish marriage, I can't afford a carriage, but you'll look sweet upon the seat of a bicycle made for two'*. I was too young to understand the significance of the words, but I liked the tunes – they had immediate appeal; like most working class children of the 1920s it was my introduction to the world of music.

Prior to 1850, in the back rooms of public houses customers provided their own amusement and some, encouraged by their fellow drinkers, proved more entertaining than others. Enterprising publicans realising the potential for increased business in this sort of entertainment, paid professional entertainers and so Music Hall was born and flourished in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. An alternative scenario is put forward in 'Allens Tyneside Songs', originally published in 1862, which might well be more relevant to the origins of the Geordie Music Hall. He states that working men were well organised and that in 1827 there were 121 clubs for men and 44 for women in Newcastle and Gateshead, which acted as mutual insurance societies. There were another 50 with a Christmas Club sort of function and in all over fifteen thousand people belonged to one or other of these clubs. Apart from the financial benefits each club had its head-meeting day at which a local musician or singer entertained in between the payout and the serious drinking. He goes on to say that in the previous century musicians had gone out to entertain their public and now the public began coming to them. It was the beginning of what was to become the Music Hall, and it also saw the birth of many Tyneside songs that would become known as Folksongs of The Tyne.

Music Hall represented the very opposite of what those dedicated to the spread of musical culture (and not forgetting those dedicated to saving souls) were trying to achieve. As we have seen there had been a certain entertainment element in early concerts but taste and standards were being raised all the time. Music Hall, however, was a working class culture and as such it was jealously guarded. Those who embraced it were not looking to raise their cultural standards and improve their minds; they sought escapism and enjoyment. It was a safety valve for the lower classes, they could, and did, openly mimic the upper classes, as well as laugh at their own misfortunes and hardships and escape from the realities of life for a few hours. It was entertainment that asked no thought on the part of the spectator and he received his amusement without any effort to himself. It furnished variety with nothing lasting very long, therefore, it made no demands on the spectator's ability to concentrate. It provided a comfortable seat in a classless environment at a low price and it was possible to

eat, drink or smoke whilst the entertainment was going on. Also it was not necessary to be there when the show started, nor stay to the end and when in the hall it was often possible to walk about freely without interference. Lastly there was audience participation and they left the theatre feeling happy in the knowledge that they had been part of the proceedings.

There were a number of Music Halls in Newcastle town centre, the earliest of which seems to have been the Old Wheatsheaf in the Cloth Market. It was a pub with a singing room and it was there in 1862 that George Ridley wrote Blaydon Races. The first performance of Ridley's song was allegedly at a benefit for Harry Clasper, who was born in Dunstan in 1812 and was the inventor of a racing skull, which won the world championship in 1845 with his two brothers. Boat races between the High Level Bridge and Scotswood Bridge were the most popular sport in the area during the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Old Wheatsheaf became the Oxford music Hall between 1858 and 1865. Another early palace of delights was the Victoria Rooms at the head of Grey Street, which became the Victoria Music Hall. On Grainger Street stood the Vaudeville but it was burned down in 1900. In 1877 the Oxford and the Victoria were joined by a third Music Hall, the Westgate Hall of Varieties. The Hippodrome on Northumberland Road also became a Music Hall, this one having been a conversion, as so many were, out of Ginnett's Circus. By the eighties and the nineties Music Hall was also attracting the middle classes and the true working class spirit of the old halls was beginning to wane. The older halls began to fade out; reverting back to public houses, grills and billiard halls and in their place newer theatres appeared. There were several Newcastle Empires, the first in 1878 on the site of the Scotch Arms. It was rebuilt in 1890 and again in 1903. Grainger's Music Hall in Nelson Street became the Gaiety Theatre of Varieties and the Percy Hall and Cirque in Percy Street became the Palace Theatre. These later variety theatres also served as general purpose halls and change was in the air. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century Music Hall had lost much of its distinctive atmosphere as it became bigger and more opulent. Individual halls were incorporated in big chains such as Moss Empires and whereas the core of the old Music Hall programme had been comic songs and choruses with everyone joining in it became less of a communal experience in bigger theatres that were more respectable, and participation became more restrained. Music Hall had started as an almost defiant expression of working class culture but it became 'Big Business' until eventually it was just another branch of the growing entertainment's industry catering for passive audiences.

## CHAPTER TEN

### MUSIC FOR EVERYONE

It is said that by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain was awash with music and certainly in Newcastle there were a growing number of societies devoted to the promotion of good music and an audience who wanted to hear it. Looking back it does seem to have been a sort of Golden Age in the town's musical history. Having discovered this I find it difficult to understand a remark made in a local history book of the 1950s, commenting on Newcastle's growth and achievements, that '*Music, like art, won little public support during the pre-1914 period*'. It is not surprising that with this kind of remark in local history books Newcastle is still generally regarded as a town without any musical history to speak of. It is true that the Victorian upper classes adopted an essentially Philistine attitude towards music, which extended to the Church, colleges and schools and there can be no doubt that this attitude worked against the town establishing a sound musical culture in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Music as a profession was rated low on the social scale – it was more 'Downstairs' than 'Upstairs' so to speak, but having said that many Victorians were deeply musical and there were the heroic few who in the face of such ignorance, devoted time and effort towards establishing a form of higher musical culture within the town and they received a good deal of public support. Choral singing was a tremendously popular activity with all classes of society, which is not surprising given the English preference for song and bearing in mind that in Victorian times, big was beautiful, especially when it came to Handel choruses. However, public performance was not always the *raison d'être* for starting up these choral societies. They were usually started by eager amateurs who under the guidance of one or more professionals sought to bring together like minded people interested in making music for the pleasure it gave them. The public concert was simply the icing on the cake for those that had worked hard during the course of the year. There were other organisations more devoted to the practise and performance of instrumental music to a high standard and whilst I understand there was considerable rivalry between these two factions I found no evidence of this in Newcastle's case.

The most famous of the choral societies at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was probably the **Newcastle and Gateshead Choral Union**, which was formed in 1896. It had originally been the Gateshead Choral Union, founded in 1889. Mainly for reasons of accommodation they amalgamated with the Newcastle Choral Union (founded by William Rea in 1860) and became a formidable body, claiming at one point to have 400 voices. It began to attract leading singers and English composers, who conducted the choir in performances of the big choral works, such as Gounod's 'Messe Solonnelle', Spohr's 'Last Judgement', Schumann's 'Advent Hymn' and Cowen's 'St. John's Eve'. They had at their

disposal a substantial orchestra under the leadership of Mr J.H. Beers. An 1895/6 programme sets out the objectives of the Society; *'Cultivating and diffusing the knowledge of and taste for high-class music'* and goes on to say that the Vocal Members must be nominated in writing and elected by the Committee after being approved as to musical fitness by the Conductor. Members were called upon to practice every Tuesday from September to March. They gave two concerts a year, mostly in the Town Hall Concert Room. These started out as Invitation Concerts but by 1896 Subscription concerts had been introduced. The full flavour of these concerts can be sampled from an announcement in The Musical Times for October 1911 under music in Newcastle-on-Tyne and District, which reads:

*'A Cowen concert – to include 'The Veil' and the Overture 'Phantasy of life and love' both conducted by the composer – will be given by the Choral Union on November 29. Sir Frederic's old orchestra, the Scottish, will play, and there will be included Elgar's 'Go, song of mine', to be conducted by the chorus-master, Dr Coward. On March 27, our premier choral body will give Dvorak's 'Spectre's Bride', Parry's 'Blest pair of Sirens' and Bantock's new unaccompanied choral ode in twenty parts, 'Atlanta in Calydon'*

Twenty-one years earlier, in 1875, William Rea had launched his **Newcastle Amateur Vocal Society** with great success. It had over 200 members, who paid 10/6 (50p) for the privilege of joining and had to practice every Monday evening. He was very strict and made it clear that those who did not turn up for practice would not be able to take part in the concerts. The concerts covered a wide range of composers from Cherubini through Haydn, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann and Mendelssohn to Neils Gade 1817-90 (A Danish composer very popular with the Victorians – not to be confused with Jacob Gade, 1879-1962, the author of the popular tango 'Jalousie'). In 1886 Dr Rea joined forces with the Northumberland Orchestral Society and for the five years of the collaboration his programmes began to include symphonies and other large orchestral works The Vocal Society continued into the 20<sup>th</sup> century but in 1897 Dr Rea was replaced as conductor by J.E.Jeffries, FRCO, possibly for health reasons. On 26<sup>th</sup> March 1896 the following complimentary piece appeared in the local press:

*'To many people present in the Town Hall on Tuesday night it would be quite a pleasure to see Dr William Rea once more occupying the position which, in days gone by, he filled so frequently and with such advantage to the cause of music in the North of England. It is impossible to see Dr Rea occupying the rostrum in the Town Hall with baton in hand, without recalling a host of successful performances of great works which he was the means of introducing to this locality, and recording our sense of the great services he has rendered to the art of music in this locality. Such services are, unhappily, soon forgotten in the rush and high-pressure of the present day world but their effect is lasting and many amateurs willingly acknowledge their indebtedness to Dr Rea for giving them their first taste of the delights of music'*

In 1892 the **Newcastle upon Tyne Harmonic Society** got off to a flourishing start in the Town Hall with a performance of the cantata 'St John's Eve' (Cowan) and they 'topped' that the following year by getting Dr Joseph Parry to conduct the cantata, 'Saul of Tarsus', with special soloists. Parry is usually credited with heading the Renaissance in English music in his excellent literary choice and the way in which he set the subject to music. The Society's annual concerts continued, somewhat erratically it seems, until the First World War, but from the programmes I have seen they were fairly 'run of the mill' affairs, although they did perform some works by contemporary English composers, which in some small way was a contribution to the revival of English music. Thirteen years earlier, in 1879, Mr Albion Alderson (presumably of Alderson and Brentnall, musical instruments, record shop and concert booking agent late of Northumberland Street) formed what seems to have been a successful amateur choir. He conducted his choir in a series of Invitation and Private concerts in the Town Hall. From a note in one of his programmes he was also desirous of forming a small orchestra. Whether he realised his orchestra or not I am not able to say but his concerts presented works by Cowen, Schumann, Gade and Brahms. The performances remained somewhat exclusive with evening dress only and a note on the programme instructing the audience to arrange their carriages for 10.15 pm.

The General Post Office, my first employer, was a very musical organisation. Long before my time, in 1896, the vocal element formed themselves into the **Postal and Telegraph Choral Society** and according to contemporary press reports their programmes were always of interest. In 1911 the society re-organised its constitution and became known as the Newcastle Musical Union. Looking back across my Post Office years, I am conscious of a strong bias towards music amongst many of my colleagues. I worked alongside a violinist, who encouraged me to go to my first concert. I was on nodding terms with a trumpet playing postman, who played in various amateur orchestras and became very friendly with a more than competent pianist, whom I used to spend my lunch hour listening to whilst he practised his Chopin on a piano in the basement air raid shelter. (His father, a Newcastle man, had been a flute player with the Boston Symphony Orchestra in America.) I suspect also that my chief in the Head Office at St Nicholas' had been an original member of the Musical Union. He would occasionally call me into his office, close the door and without warning, much to my embarrassment, burst into song – usually a bass ballad such as 'Rocked in the cradle of the deep' or 'In Cellar Cool', ending on a low note that made me instinctively look down at his boots. As the last note was absorbed into the office carpet there would be a moments pause for appreciation, then he would clear his throat, and ask, "How's that Joe?"

One of the most seriously committed of the many societies at this time was the **Chamber Music Society** formed in 1880. Even today it is mouth-watering to look through the societies programmes; chamber concerts for the connoisseur with

only the finest artists. The printed programmes themselves were exceptional and included musical examples of the leading themes of each movement and texts of songs plus extensive notes. The Bohemian Quartet, The Rose Quartet, The Brodsky Quartet and the St Petersburg Quartet are only four of the many chamber groups that appeared at these concerts. Up to the time of the First World War the Society presented four concerts a season rising to six. The standard was presumably incredibly high with world-renowned violinists, Joseph Joachim, Eugene Ysaye and Pablo Sarasate appearing often. This level was maintained, and arguably exceeded, right through until the 1940s but we shall return to the post WWII period later. Georg Henschel (later Sir George) concert baritone, composer and conductor of Polish birth, gave a song recital and other singers, David Bispham, Liza Lehmann, Blanche Marchesi, and Plunket Green also appeared in concert. Charles Halle accompanied his wife, Wilma Neruda, violinist, as did Henry Wood his first wife, the singer, Olga Hillman, the former Princess Olga Michailowna Ourousoff. In 1912 the composer/pianist Eugene d'Albert made an appearance and was presumably acknowledged by the select audience for the artist he was. Had I been there I would willingly have given an old penny coin to each member of the audience on that evening to know what they were really thinking as they listened to this turncoat of a piano player.

Eugene d'Albert was born in Glasgow on 10<sup>th</sup> April 1864 but was raised in Newcastle. His father was of mixed German/French parentage from Hamburg and his mother was a resident of Newcastle – some reports say of Russian extraction. According to another version, his parental ancestors were Italian and his father was a dancing master and composer. In the circumstances, Eugene Francis Charles d'Albert, as he was baptised, was technically English. He received his early musical training from his father and at the age of twelve he was elected Newcastle scholar in the since defunct National Training School of Music in London. At one point he studied with Sir Arthur Sullivan but drove Sir Arthur 'up the wall'. He made his debut as a pianist at sixteen and premiered his first piano concerto at seventeen before being awarded a Mendelssohn Scholarship and going to Vienna to study with Hans Richter, the Hungarian/German conductor. Before d'Albert was twenty years old he had established himself in Germany and proclaimed his contempt in the Press for England and everything English. Surprisingly, he returned to Newcastle a number of times and gave recitals. He had appeared at the Olympia on Northumberland Road on 2<sup>nd</sup> October 1896 and must to some extent have redeemed himself to be invited back in 1912. Perhaps it was not until after this that he openly made it known he supported the Kaiser. Whilst we have no way of knowing the audiences' individual thoughts and opinions on this diminutive piano player we do have the benefit of the following morning's press review; -

*'Musical England may not have appreciated Mr d'Albert at his proper artistic value but no opportunity is lost nowadays when the eminent pianist condescends to revisit his native country – to make reparations for the early sins of omission. Newcastle last night added its voice – a voice that should have proved*

*particularly sweet and satisfying to the popular pianist – to the paeans of praise with which musical England is at present resounding in appreciation of his merits and although “he is now German” to quote his own words. We hope and think that he will still be sufficiently English to remain not indifferent to the undivided voice of contemporary opinion. Possibly the cordiality and unanimity of last night’s crowded audience may do something towards removing the reproach which former generation is supposed to have offered.’*

The reviewer then went on to pay d’Albert a backhanded compliment by saying ‘*The programme was interesting but not engrossingly so!*’

The Chamber Music Society held their concerts in the Old Assembly Rooms on Westgate Road but there were also chamber music concerts taking place in the New Assembly Rooms at Barras Bridge although, it has to be said, not of the same standard. Mr J.H.Beers, whom we left conducting the Newcastle and Gateshead Choral Union Orchestra, was presenting his own series of chamber concerts. He seems to have managed one concert a year and it was a family affair with a S.H. Beers on violoncello and the daughter Mimi providing the vocals. The New Assembly Rooms at Barras Bridge (now the University of Newcastle Centre for Physical Recreation and Sport) appear to have lent themselves well to small-scale performances and were a centre of musical activity in the town between the 1880s and 1914. Ladies’ string orchestras were a prominent feature of the period largely brought about by the fact that women were denied entry into orchestras. Miss Hildegard Werner mounted a number of concerts with the Mignon String Orchestra and her lady pupils at Barras Bridge and another ladies string orchestra under the leadership of Miss Knocker seems to have been very popular.

Yet another Society, that started up in 1907, but probably had its roots in the 19th century was the **Classical Concert Society**. It proved, by the content of its programmes, genuinely committed to presenting a better standard of chamber music and raising the standards of its audiences. The notice advertising its 1907-08 Season outlines four concerts although it makes reference to a total of eight. These were Subscription concerts but there was admission at the door for non-members and a special rate for children, which was to the Society’s credit and shows a commitment to educate the young at a time when poorer children were still being freely exploited as cheap labour by Industry. Having said that, what any child would have made of the music played I cannot imagine as it was an esoteric mix of mostly French and English composers from as far back as the 17<sup>th</sup> century. Avison’s Concerto in G, Op 9, No 1 for two violins, viola, violoncello and pianoforte was played in a programme of music by English composers on 6th January 1910. Other programmes featured professional musicians and singers from Vienna, Paris, Stuttgart, Frankfurt and Copenhagen and one of the highlights was a concert on 20<sup>th</sup> January 1911, given by the Parisian String Quartet with the thirty-six year old Maurice Ravel, not quite yet at the pinnacle of his fame, playing his own music together with that of Faure, Saint-Saens and

Cesar Franck. One novel feature introduced by the society for subscription members was a combined concert and rail ticket available on Special West Trains to most stations on the way to Hexham - composed of First Class accommodation only!

There was a wide variety of music to choose from in pre 1914 Newcastle; something for everyone so to speak -. from Music Hall to high art. Between these two extremes (the one intolerant of the other) thrived a whole world of musical culture and entertainment that provided a certain amount of common ground. Even the streets must have echoed to the sound of music in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century if we accept the following general plea from 1895, *'If we must not hope to put down the noisy vulgarities of street music, let us at least strive to make them as little mischievous as possible. Even if barrel-organs and church bells were only required to be in tune a very great advance would have been made'*.

**The Northumberland Orchestral Society** formed in 1877 was the earliest dedicated to the instrumentalist. The object of the society was to give amateur instrumentalists of the district every possible facility to cultivate a taste for high-class orchestral music. It was £1 1s for Gentlemen and 10/6 for Ladies to join which entitled them to be present at rehearsals and concerts. The Society gave one concert a year and the orchestra could comprise anything up to one hundred players. Their programmes were interesting sometimes; in 1910 they introduced 'Praeludium' by Jarnefelt, 1859-1958 (Swedish composer, whose sister married Sibelius) to Newcastle, which subsequently became very popular, and in 1913 they gave the Newcastle premier of Svendson's Symphony No 2. After Grieg, Svendson was the most important nineteenth century Norwegian composer. This was ground breaking stuff and we should not forget that the orchestra comprised mostly amateurs. Following the 1911 concert the press was prompted to write, *'We, ourselves, entertain little fear that Newcastle will yet bring itself into a more satisfactory position with regard to orchestral concerts than at present obtains'*. It was wishful thinking as war loomed up ahead and even the Northumberland Orchestral Society was obliged to suspend its activities. But to its credit and against all odds it started up again in 1921 and is, or so I believe, still going today. I read somewhere that it has adapted to a different role. It enables amateur players to study and rehearse orchestral music, of which it has a large library and it gives orchestral concerts for friends at which both classical and contemporary works are played'

All manner of events gave rise to some form of musical entertainment in Newcastle in the period leading up to the 1914-18 War. Although when His Majesty King Edward VII visited the town with Queen Alexandra on 11<sup>th</sup> July 1906 it seems to have been a dull affair musically. Perhaps the whole thing would have been better left to the **Durham Northumberland and Newcastle on Tyne Horticultural Society**, who laid on a lavish musical display each year, which I imagine was quite incidental to their main purpose. There appear to have been Spring Shows and Summer Shows, held in the Town Hall and Corn

Exchange, and Leazes Park. These shows in some form or other could have been going since as early as 1824 if we can believe what is said in an 1887 programme that claims to be the 63<sup>rd</sup> year the event had been held. Reviewing at random the years 1878 – 83; we see that the Spring shows were a two day event with military bands playing all afternoon and evening. These included the bands of the Royal Marines, Dragoon Guards, Royal engineers and the Coldstream Guards, conducted by Fred Godfrey – father of Dan Godfrey, founder of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra. The repertoire of these bands included pieces by many well-known classical composers. In 1879 the military bands alternated with an orchestra under the leadership of Mr J.H. Beers (yet again) with the addition of vocal items on the programme. It was no reflection on the military bands but this arrangement did lend itself to a better selection and greater variety of musical items. By 1882, in Leazes Park, the musical programme included Highland Bands and Choral Music. In 1883 the Spring show featured Mon. Riviere's Covent Garden Orchestra Band in a marathon effort from 1.30 pm to 10.00 in the evening. By 1891 the Orchestral Band of Mr John H. Amers (father of H.G. Amers) was making an appearance. This was a name that would feature prominently not only in the Military Band culture that seems to have flourished at around this time, but in the story of music in general.

The Amers, three generations of them, were professional musicians from the North East. H.G.Amers, the son of J.H.Amers, started as a chorister in St Georges' Newcastle and as a youth he played a solo by command before the Princess of Wales and several times before King Edward VII. He was in the Northumberland Hussars and saw service in the 1914-18 War in which he was wounded in action, later being given command of a prisoner-of-war camp. After the war he became a Captain in the Reserve. He was a handsome fellow; it seems, always immaculately dressed with a red carnation in his buttonhole and red hair to match. Much admired by lady members of the audience it is said. He made his name in Eastbourne where he conducted the pier orchestra, billed as Captain H.G. Amers and his Famous Band. He had flair and a good sense of showmanship and never arrived until the second item on the programme, allowing his deputy to start the concert off. He appeared, as did the orchestra, in uniform during the day but in the evening he put on evening dress and became Captain Amers and his Famous Orchestra. Uniforms, flair, style, swagger, these were all essential ingredients of the Military Band Concerts that had their vogue at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Military Band Concerts were part of Victorian life and when later the War Office put a stop to army bands playing outside their regimental districts a gap was left in the music world which was filled to some extent by civilian bands that sought to recreate the style and swagger of their military equivalents. They provided good quality programmes with a mix of instrumental pieces and song, The instrumental pieces comprised specially composed items as well as arrangements, rousing marches operatic selections, trivia, pot pouris and even requests from the audience. Many of the great composers composed pieces

especially for these bands and they did not rely wholly on arrangements. The aim of these concerts was relaxed informality. A series of concerts by Amers' Band in May and June 1901 was advertised as, *'Will fill the listening air with lovely melodies and in the words of the bard of Avon "discourse most eloquent music"*. In 1903 a Fete Champetre at the Riding School Grounds in Northumberland Road was being advertised, to take place for one month, commencing on 5<sup>th</sup> September. Promenade Concerts by the Northumberland Hussars Band under the direction of Lieut. H.G. Amers. Amers and his band appears again in 1907 and in the printed programme there is a picture of the handsome bandleader resplendent in full uniform. Another programme from the same period shows him in a different uniform with the combined bands of the Northumberland Hussars, featuring songs sung by Madame Norman Snowball.

In 1901 John Philip Sousa, himself, came to Newcastle with his famous band and raised the roof of the Town Hall. Comments written on the programme in pencil against each item played (presumably by the original owner on the night) read, *perfect, lovely, charming, grand and grandioso*. The Black Dike (programme spelling) played in 1902 and in 1911 the Ellery Band performed for one week. The blurb on the billing for this band of fifty Italian Americans stated that they refused to bow to the popular clamour for inferior music and had done wonders in the way of uplifting the taste for really good music. Their programmes were made up of music by Beethoven, Handel, Wagner, Gounod, Verdi, Waldteufel, Mascagni, Leoncavallo, Nicolai, Boito and Flotow. In 1918 more Italian musicians turned up in Newcastle in the form of the Band of the Royal Italian Carabinieri. They gave an impromptu performance in front of the Joseph Cowan monument on Westgate Road, another in front of St Nicholas' and a third down on Sandhill in front of the Commercial Exchange. This must have been a sight to behold - seventy-five musicians in Napoleonic costumes. Mr Sutherland of the Exchange extended a welcome and told them that in 1854 Garibaldi was on board a vessel in the Tyne and as soon as this was known there was a spontaneous collection around Tyneside, limited to one penny a head, in order that the people could present him with a sword and telescope. This must have gone down well with the Italians as the Band of the Rome Promenade Concerts followed hot on the heels of the Carabinieri that same year.

At one of the meetings of the People's Concerts Committee in the Town Hall a committee member remarked that the Police Concerts were the best concerts being given in Newcastle at the time. I would not entirely agree with that statement but it has to be said that the Annual Police Concert, in aid of various charities including the Newcastle Constabulary Benevolent Fund and War Relief Funds was always, at least vocally, of a high standard. In 1890 and 1892 Adelina Patti (1843-1919) known as the Queen of Song, idolised in Paris, Milan, Brussels, Monte Carlo, St. Petersburg, Moscow, Berlin, Vienna, Madrid and Lisbon, obliged the Law by appearing at their annual concert and sang a number of operatic arias as well as the song 'Il Bacio' and the beautiful 'Banks of Allen Water'. Other singers making an appearance at these concerts over the period

1890 –1915 were, Edward Lloyd, Madame Albani, Clara Butt, Andrew Black, Carrie Tubb, Gervase Elwes and Agnes Nicholls who was accompanied by her husband, Hamilton Harty. Harty, listed today as organist, pianist and conductor was one of the first conductors from the British isles to win international fame and in 1920 rescued a floundering Halle Orchestra and turned it into a first class ensemble, although at the turn of the century he was only a concert accompanist. These well-attended annual concerts took place mostly in the Town Hall and The Olympia on Northumberland Road, a general purpose hall opened in 1893.

Open air band concerts were a prominent feature of Victorian and Edwardian life and continued up to the outbreak of the Second World War. Two early examples were the concerts put on by the **Electrical and General Engineering Trades Industry and Art** in 1897 featuring the Royal Marines Light Infantry Band that played music by Sousa, selections from Gilbert and Sullivan operas, and Wagner and in 1906, The **Northern Counties Trades/Arts and Industries Exhibition** in Leazes Park that went on for two months and had music performed by the String Band of the Royal Artillery every afternoon and evening. It seems odd that Newcastle City Council haggled over spending money on the People's Concerts in the Town Hall but seemed to have no problem with allocating money for music in the parks. Many of the town's parks had bandstands (a beautiful example is still to be seen in Exhibition Park) and on Sundays and Bank Holidays they attracted large numbers of people, who sat around on chairs or benches, dressed in their Sunday best – men in their dark serge suits with starched collar, tie and waistcoat – ladies wearing fashionable hats - enjoying the colourful spectacle of the bandsmen in their pseudo-military uniforms, and the selections they played of well known operatic airs and popular pieces of light music. From 1900 until the 1930s the Council presented Parks' Promenade Concerts in the City's main parks. Large format programmes provided the audience with a list from which the concert selection would be chosen.

Military Band style concerts were a colourful phase in the history of music in Newcastle but appeared to go out of fashion with the Second World War. However, Brass Bands, which initially had a much lower profile and attracted less attention were an important development in the social as well as the musical history of the town. Like the Music Hall they were part of working class culture but unlike Music Hall the movement was never infiltrated and remained solid working class to the core. It grew from strength to strength over the years. Today, whilst these bands are fewer in number it is now a national movement. How it all started no one is really sure and like the Tyneside Music Hall its origins are vague. It may have been that these bands were founded as an imitation of the many army, militia or volunteer bands that were around during the period of the Napoleonic Wars, 1793 –1815. And/or they may have come about when ex military bandsmen took their musical skills home with them from the army. On the other hand, they may simply have arisen from a desire to make a sound on crude locally manufactured instruments. But what seems fairly certain is that with the introduction of valved wind instruments in the 1840s, which facilitated their

playing, coupled with the means of purchasing these instruments and perhaps the greater availability of printed sheet music, the Brass Band Movement took off in a big way. Some of the first Brass Bands were established in the North East. Most collieries, factories, shipyards and other industrial concerns, although reluctant to become involved at first, eventually took a pride in their band and the movement generated a great deal of healthy competition subsequently giving rise to not only local but regional and national band contests. The Brass Band Movement was popular by definition but made a contribution to art music in that it created the first mass involvement of working class people in instrumental 'art' music. It has always been an awkward union; many classical composers were to write pieces for brass band ( Gustav Holst was the first in 1928 with his Moorside Suite) but 'arty' musical establishments and serious music lovers kept them at arms length. They suffered a bit from an image of 'comic book' northerness' although they spread across the length and breadth of the British Isles. However, brass band contests have raised playing standards, and as well as keeping the Brass Band Movement alive, have also helped to produce some of the country's best orchestral brass players. The movement still survives today even if it has suffered from the raised standards of the working classes and the many other preferred ways the younger members now have of spending their leisure time rather than standing in some draughty hall, dressed in a 'uncool' uniform and doing hours of tedious practice.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

### THE CELEBRITY CONCERTS

There was a feast of music to be found in Newcastle in the late Victorian Era and whilst much of it was generated within the town by enthusiastic amateurs standards were gradually being raised by an increasing number of visiting orchestras and solo artists on national and international tours. The Town Hall in the Bigg Market was the main concert hall and from all reports it was an inadequate building for the purpose. Unlike some other larger provincial cities Newcastle not having shown any great civic interest in music (beyond bands in the park) and as a consequence presumably had never considered a purpose built concert hall a priority or a necessity for that matter. Concerts were held in a variety of rooms and halls around the town. Mr Hares, who owned a pianoforte and harmonium warehouse on Grey Street, was advertising his 300<sup>th</sup> Grand Concert to be held in the Town Hall by 1881. These concerts comprised mostly the usual vocal and solo instrumental pieces but in 1892 he did manage to tempt Pablo de Sarasate, world famous violinist, to come to Newcastle and play. Eleven years later he presented (as they used to say in those far off Musical Hall days “Our very own”) Marie Hall, violinist, age nineteen. The North East has given birth to many fine singers and musicians but few more famous than Marie Hall, who was born into poverty but rose to become an international artist. At an early age she was befriended by Edward Elgar and his wife, who wrote in her diary in 1895, when Marie was only eleven years old, ‘(Elgar) gave the little girl Hall a lesson and some chocolates’. Years later Marie Hall was to make the first recording, with the composer, of his violin concerto. Immediately prior to her appearance at Mr Hare’s concert she had made her debut in Prague (1902), Vienna (1903) and London at St James Hall on 16<sup>th</sup> February that same year. She appeared in her home town many times thereafter and at one of her concerts in 1905 she had printed programmes listing eighty-six pieces numbered 1 to 86 and a note at the top of the programme that read ‘Items will be selected from the following and the number displayed at the side of the stage’. But perhaps the best known European woman violinist of her time was Madam Wilma Norman-Neruda, who appeared in concert at the Town Hall in December 1883. Few of these early instrumentalists, however, could have claimed a reputation to match that of Anton Rubinstein, who at the peak of his fame played a recital in Newcastle’s Town Hall on 20<sup>th</sup> March 1877. He had performed before Chopin and Liszt and left a deep impression on Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov. He founded the St Petersburg Conservatoire and established what is even today recognised as the Russian school of piano playing.

With the growth of the professional symphony orchestra and the rise of the Impresario Newcastle began to enjoy an unprecedented period of music making

that continued until 1914. One of the first orchestras to come to Newcastle was from Manchester, the Charles Halle Band, which had been founded in 1856/57 by Halle from Germany, who was knighted in 1888 for his services to music. Through the good offices of Alderson and Brentnall, subscription concerts were arranged throughout 1876-1889 and regular series' of concerts were given by the orchestra. In 1886 Hans Richter and an orchestra of eighty-five musicians visited Newcastle for the first time and in 1888, Augustus Manns, of Crystal Palace fame, with his orchestra played in Newcastle, as they were to do for many seasons after that. Richter had a 'bee in his bonnet' about Manns, who, he was convinced, was trying to do him down as they followed each other around the country on tour. In 1904/5 Henry Wood and the Queen's Hall Orchestra played in town for the first time and the following season had the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Edward Elgar playing three of his own compositions. He returned again in 1916 with the LSO and after the war on 8<sup>th</sup> May 1920 as conductor of the Leeds Choral Union in a performance of his oratorio 'The Apostles' in St Nicholas' Cathedral. On this occasion, which was a time of bereavement for the composer following the death of his beloved wife, Alice, he noted in his diary '*Our wedding day 1889*'

Much earlier on 24<sup>th</sup> November 1900 Richter returned to Newcastle with the Halle Orchestra and gave the first performance in the town of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. That same year he gave Newcastle their first performances of Dvorak's New World Symphony and Edward Elgar's Enigma Variations. Hans Richter, who had known Wagner well and conducted the premier of his Ring Cycle, was very pro-English – although his spoken English was reportedly poor - and he did a good deal for English orchestras and orchestral music in the provinces in those early days. On 20<sup>th</sup> March 1901 Richter and the Halle Orchestra joined forces with the Newcastle and Gateshead Choral Union in a concert performance of 'Faust' by Hector Berlioz that took place at the Olympia on Northumberland Road. The Musical Times reported afterwards that concerts recently given in Newcastle by the Choral Union and the Halle Orchestra surpassed anything previously heard in that town at that time. In the 1903/4 Season the Choral Union invited Dr Richter and the Halle Orchestra to Newcastle and took the unusual step of a vote amongst its members as to what items should make up the programme; based on a list of a number of specified works suggested by Dr Richter. Of the symphonies the Eroica of Beethoven topped the list with 137 votes, Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony came second with only 81 votes and Brahms Second Symphony, third with 47 votes. Wagner came out on top in the overtures and only Cherubini got no votes. In the other sections Wagner romped home with 240 votes for his '*Walkurenrittand*' and Richard Strauss was second with his '*Tod und Verklarung*'. The whole exercise proved to some extent that Newcastle audiences did not just want to hear the old and familiar and were not afraid to try the new. In the press review following the concert the audience was complimented on its advanced taste, although, the review went on to say:

*'The effort of listening to such a continuous succession of strongly emotional highly coloured pieces was exhausting and one felt the desirability of a few moments of repose, but for those who could thrive on such highly spiced meats it was indeed a lordly banquet'*

Dr Richter, true to his name, judged the Newcastle music lovers to have excellent taste in their choice of music.

In 1908 the newly formed London Symphony Orchestra played in Newcastle under Artur Nikisch, one of music's all-time great conductors. One of his LSO players said of him *'He simply looked at us, often scarcely moving his baton and we played as those possessed; we made terrific crescendi, sudden commas before some great chord, though we had never done this before. He shows us how to attain to the most beautiful and the highest in art, and we endeavour to realise his ideals'* Jan Kubelik, the renowned Czechoslovak violinist played at a Celebrity Concert in 1900. It was said of his playing –though not specifically on this occasion, that it was the climax of technical perfection, his tone was noble and full and his expression, whilst distinguished, was not very deep. In 1912 Fritz Kreisler, whose name became a household word for violin playing, and John McCormack, the Irish tenor and greatest of ballad singers (although unfortunately sang everything with an Irish accent) gave a concert together. and the touching beauty of their combined art can still be recaptured on the acoustic recordings they made together. Paderewski, pianist, composer and later eminent Polish statesman, was a frequent visitor to Newcastle playing in the Town Hall, Barras Bridge Assembly Rooms and even in the Palace Theatre. It was common for such great artists to appear in concert at the Palace, which I remember, from the 1940s as a rather seedy second-rate variety theatre presenting ventroloquists, juggling acts and other touring acts, long since past their 'sell by dates'. Nellie Melba and Anna Pavlova, the famous ballerina noted for her performance of the Dying Swan, both performed there following the 1914-18 War in a series of International Subscription Concerts. The theatre was also used by the (Newcastle) Philharmonic Orchestra but we shall return to them later.

Between 1897 and 1914 Percy Harrison, the Birmingham concert manager, presented a series of Ballad Concerts in Newcastle. These concerts featured outstanding artists singing and playing popular pieces. The formula was a guaranteed moneymaker given the weakness of the average Victorian for sentimental ballads. They proved popular enough in Newcastle and the attendance was generally good but it did fluctuate. They were heavily criticised in the press for pandering to public taste and presenting music that was worthless from the artistic standpoint. Worthless or not, one hundred years on, the list of soloists makes the head spin; Adelina Patti, Edouard de Reszke, Tetrzzini, Maggie Teyte, Clara Butt, Aino Ackte and Nellie Melba. All of these names speak for themselves and need no comment from me. The instrumentalists included Artur de Greef, Paderewski, Busoni; pianists – Kreisler, Ysaye, Zimbalist and Elman; violinists and Pablo Casals, cello. What these eminent string virtuosi

thought of performing with a bunch of singers, no matter how fine, is not recorded but the following comment attributed to Ysaye following a similar tour in England in 1891 might give a clue to their thoughts in general. *'If I do not say more about the tour it is simply because there is nothing to say. I travel with two empty-headed singers- they sing like cockatoos- with whom one cannot exchange a single idea'*. One of the artists Harrison presented at his celebrity concerts around this time, 23 November 1910 to be precise, was the outstanding Russian concert pianist, Vladimir De Packmann. De Packmann was an eccentric, or he cultivated eccentric behaviour when performing (he was not alone in this) in a way that is unknown today amongst 'serious' artists. He would start playing a piece – say by Chopin – suddenly stop – and directly address the audience with "That is not how Chopin should be played, this is how he should sound". I suppose audiences went to his piano recitals hoping to witness a moments eccentricity and give them something to pass on to their grandchildren, which is confirmed to some extent by the following excerpt from a local press review of the time:

*'Indeed his admirers now look for them (platform eccentricities) as a matter of course and as a legitimate part of their entertainment and were he to discard those peculiar mannerisms which are his own exclusive stock in trade, the Russian pianist would doubtless disappoint many of his audience'*

Once asked for his opinion as to whom he considered the greatest living pianist, De Packmann piously rejoined, after due reflection, "Godowsky is the second greatest". He was nevertheless an outstanding Chopin interpreter and had the distinction, when he died, of being one of only two pianists born in Chopin's lifetime who lived long enough to make gramophone recordings.

Harrison's Ballad Concerts took place in the Olympia, Northumberland Road, until 1899 and then in the Town Hall. Percy Harrison and his uncle Thomas entered into concert management it is said, to educate the musical tastes of the people, but they were also a couple of astute business men and when I noticed a note in one of the Harrison programmes, cancelling the intervals at future Newcastle concerts, my interest was aroused. It was the 6<sup>th</sup> October 1899 when a notice appeared in a Harrison concert programme that read: -

*'Mr Harrison begs respectfully to announce that at the suggestion of many of his Subscribers and supporters he has decided to abolish the interval in the programme of his concerts for the forthcoming season.*

*Experience and observation have shown that very few persons (and constituting a very small percentage indeed of the audience) leave the Hall at the Interval, and it is not an unreasonable complaint on the part of the larger number who remain in their seats, that there should be a waste of time in the middle of the programme, for which there is no apparent necessity.*

*Having therefore experimentally eliminated the Interval from his programmes on one or two occasions, and being very pleased with the results, Mr HARRISON*

*begs to announce his intention of now experimentally abolishing it for an entire Season'*

Even in 1899 the call of nature could not be ignored but as any such reference to bodily functions was taboo in polite Victorian Society I found myself intrigued as to how the matter would be resolved. A notice headed 'THE INTERVAL' in the next concert programme held the answer.

*'The question as to the abolition of the Interval, which (at the request of a number of Subscribers) has been realised this season by Mr HARRISON, is evidently one which will not secure unanimity of sentiment, whichever way it is eventually decided, since the opinions of the general body of the Subscribers, so far as they have been at present expressed, vary very much.*

*Some Subscribers dislike the change because it does not give the opportunity for meeting and chatting with friends in other parts of the Hall, whilst on the other hand, a number of Subscribers welcome the change for exactly the same reason, since they contend that an interval sufficiently long for this purpose, either means a curtailment of the Programme which might otherwise be presented, or else that the performance of the later items of the Programme is interfered with by the necessary exodus of many persons leaving before the end of the Concert, in order to catch their trains.*

*Other Subscribers have remarked that although they do not desire a long Interval, they would like just a short Interval, or break, in the middle of the programme, and this is the view which will probably be taken by the majority of the Subscribers.*

*Mr HARRISON has a perfectly open mind upon the question, his only desire being to carry out such arrangements as will best conduce to the comfort, and meet the wishes, of the audiences, and with a view of ascertaining this, he proposes to limit the experiment of no Interval to the present concert (instead of continuing it through the entire season as originally announced) and to then take a plebiscite of his Subscribers as to the arrangements to be made for the future'*

Needless to say nothing further was heard of this cost cutting exercise.

I have attempted in this chapter to include as many as possible of the more famous musical personalities that appeared in Newcastle during this musically fertile period but there will be others, who for one reason or another have been left out. Some of those I have mentioned paid repeated visits to the town, others may have appeared only once. Such as the French composer, organist, teacher and critic, Charles Widor (1844-1937), a name well enough known today but for one piece only, the Toccata movement from his fifth symphony, played at all the best weddings often as an alternative to the Mendelssohn or Wagner wedding marches. He performed in St Nicholas' in 1891 at the opening of the Grand Organ. Tamara Karsavina, one of the greatest Russian ballerinas, who left Russia after the Bolshevik Revolution, gave a flying matinee (there and gone within hours) performance at the Hippodrome, Northumberland Road, in 1919.

She danced a full programme of well-known short ballet extracts. Adelina Patti, who had appeared a number of times in the town made her last appearance in the Town Hall on 18<sup>th</sup> October 1907, where she appeared with the baritone, Robert Radford. Possibly inspired by all this musical activity Newcastle decided to make one last effort to emulate the Three Choirs Festivals that were still taking place regularly in Leeds, Worcester and Birmingham and mount a three day festival of their own, inviting, as was customary at these showcase events, musical forces from outside town. The festival took place on the 20<sup>th</sup> – 22<sup>nd</sup> October 1909 and seems to have been a success. The organisers dispensed with the old Grand Festival formula, ditching Handel and his oratorios to make room for the big Romantic works of Brahms, Liszt, Strauss, Busoni and Tchaikovsky. Another innovation was the inclusion of a number of British works conducted by their composers and these included two first public performances by composers active in Newcastle.

The newly formed London Symphony Orchestra was hired together with the famous Russian conductor, Wassili Safanoff, renowned for his Tchaikovsky performances and also for conducting without a baton (a struggling young would-be conductor from London was later to adopt Safanoff's batonless style and turn it into an art – his name was Leopold Stokowski) Edward Elgar, Granville Bantock, and Rutland Boughton conducted their own works and the titanic pianist, composer, conductor, teacher, writer and first rate musical thinker, Ferruccio Dante Michaelangiolo Benvenuto Busoni (1866-1924) played his own five movement piano concerto. Following its premier, Professor Dent, respected writer and critic, said that it *provoked extremes of reaction; rapture and outrage and between these two the silent majority simply shook their heads in stupefaction. It was noise, more noise, then eccentricity and licentiousness provoked yet more noise. The five movements were submerged in a flood of cacophony painting the joys of lusting barbarians, the orgies of absinthe drinkers and common prostitutes.* One of the more interesting aspects of the festival was surely the two first public performances of works written by composers who were closely associated with the town, itself. The first of these was Edgar L. Bainton, a London born musician (1880), whose orchestral work 'Promethius' was given its first performance. Bainton was at this time teacher of piano and composition at the Newcastle Conservatoire. We shall leave him for the moment and take a closer look at his interesting and unusual career in a later chapter. The other composer was Adam von Ahn Carse, born in Newcastle on 19<sup>th</sup> May 1878. It would seem that he changed his name for professional reasons. At age fourteen he was being educated in Hanover in Germany but later attended the Royal Academy of Music and appears to have spent most of his active life teaching music at Winchester and the RAM. His Symphony in G minor was given its first public performance at the festival and as with Bainton above he conducted his own work. As well as his own compositions he edited many classical symphonies by Abel, Arne, J.C.Bach, Dittersdorf, Fils, Gossec, Stamnitz among others and wrote extensively on music including a book on The Life of Julien, whom he refers to as the 'Establisher of the Promenade Concerts in England.

Of all the celebrities to appear in Newcastle during this Golden Age, none of the names quite conjures up the magic as that of the world famous Italian tenor, Enrico Caruso, who, on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1909 came to Newcastle and sang before an audience in the Town Hall. Caruso was no stranger to England; he maintained a flat in Maida Vale in London, which he visited when he could to see his son who was being privately educated there. Although he had appeared in opera at Covent Garden he had never sung in the provinces and this was to be the one and only time brought about by circumstances rather than design. In 1909 Caruso suffered throat trouble and cancelled the last part of his Met. Season in New York to receive treatment. Following the operation on his throat he tested his voice at a couple of concerts at the Kursaal in Ostende. As these concerts went well he decided to test his voice further in the English provinces taking the view that it was perhaps wiser to face the audience and critics of Newcastle and other provincial towns before facing those of London. He decided to break his voice in gently and sing three numbers only on each programme. According to the programme he was to sing 'Celeste Aida' (from Aida by Verdi), 'O Paradiso' (from L'Africaine by Meyerbeer) and the duet 'Solenne in quest' ora' (from Don Carlos by Verdi) with Sig. Lacomte, baritone, but on the night Caruso lived up to his generous reputation and gave the audience what they wanted to hear. Let the Journal for Saturday 11<sup>th</sup> September 1909 take up the story; -

*'Although Newcastle did not follow the example of Glasgow and other large towns by crowding the Town Hall to overflowing last night, when Sig. Caruso appeared for the first time in the city, it was nevertheless a large audience that welcomed this distinguished tenor, and their enthusiasm was something to be long remembered. What blank spaces there were, were due, no doubt, not to any lack of desire to make acquaintance with the singer but rather to inability or determination not to pay the price – the heavy price which the possession of a seat required. Last night's concert proved that Caruso is just as fortunate in his voice as he is in those clever people associated with him, who help to keep his name before the public and that is saying a great deal. No artist, perhaps, has been "boomed" to the same extent as this one, and those who had the pleasure of hearing him last night will agree that it is difficult to recall one who more thoroughly deserves the many kind things that have been said of him. In other words great expectations were more than realised.*

*It is no reflection on the famous tenor's artistic colleagues to say that Caruso was first and the rest nowhere'*

The review goes on to list the programme Caruso sang, which in addition to the three arias scheduled, included the songs, 'Ideale', 'Euand io ti Guardo' and 'Pour un Baiser' by Tosti, 'Musica Proibita' by Gustaldon, and 'Lento Chat t'Amo' by Latuo. As a final encore he sang – what else – but 'Vest la Giubba' (On with the Motley) from I Pagliacci by Leoncavallo.

The appearance in Newcastle of Enrico Caruso was something more than just another recital by a man who one hundred years on is still called 'The Great Caruso' and has inspired generation after generation of tenors, none of whom have quite matched him in excellence. It was a landmark concert not only in the context of Newcastle's musical history but also music in general. Caruso would have been the first artist to appear in Newcastle whose voice and art would already have been familiar to some of the audience even though they had not previously heard him in person. They would have heard his voice on the latest invention – the phonograph or gramophone, still considered by many people then as a toy – a passing fad. The question 'Did Caruso make the gramophone or did the gramophone make Caruso' has never really been answered but one thing was certain on that September evening and that is the audience were listening to the man who more than anyone else helped establish recording, which eventually, but inevitably was to change how the world would experience music.

## CHAPTER TWELVE

### THE NEWCASTLE CONSERVATOIRE

The word Conservatoire, from the Italian, Conservatorio, which can mean any number of things, was used not so long ago as a synonym for a school of music. It sounded just that bit more impressive and so when two Newcastle music teachers decided to pool their talents and open a school of music in Claremont buildings, Barras Bridge they hit on the idea of calling it, rather pretentiously, the Newcastle Conservatoire. This was a period when music schools were being established in a number of the larger provincial towns in England. Birmingham founded its School of Music in 1854 and Manchester followed with its College of Music in 1893. There had never been any shortage of music teachers in Newcastle but these teachers were limited in scope, usually teaching one or two instruments at which they, themselves, were proficient. In the early 19<sup>th</sup> century many music teachers had their names posted in the local directory under the heading 'Academies'. In the Newcastle Directory for 1894, a list headed "Professors" included 66 who taught music, seven teaching languages and six dancing. One of these professors was Mr W McConnell Wood and it was he, who with Miss Maud, a pianist, joined forces and founded the Newcastle Conservatoire of Music in 1898

The new establishment obviously thrived and by the turn of the century it had an impressive list of patrons, including the Countess of Ravensworth and Lady Ridley, as well as five musical knights namely Charles Grove, A. Mackenzie, Walter Parratt, James Stainer and Frederick Bridge and the Mayor of Newcastle. Information on the Conservatoire's early years is hard to come by but it seems that Mr Wood left and went off to teach on his own, but not before he had started a tradition of modest concerts by the pupils. These concerts comprised chamber music of substantial content with a variety of vocal and instrumental music by both classical and (then) contemporary composers and were given in the Grand Assembly Rooms, Barras Bridge, Connaught Hall and sometimes in the King's Hall at Armstrong College. Many of the programmes have been preserved for us in the City Library Archives and show that these concerts continued until at least the year 1929.

In 1901 Miss Maud was the Principal and the Conservatoire had a known staff of two but there were probably others. In 1906 it moved its premises to 22 St Mary's Place and by 1912 the Conservatoire was obviously in full swing and the future looked very promising. The newly appointed Principal was Edgar L.Bainton, a talented London born musician and one of the rising generation of British composers destined to contribute extensively to the English Musical

Renaissance. His teaching staff were no less impressive and included Dr William Gillies Whittaker, respected English choral conductor, pedagogue, composer and founder of the Bach Choir (1915) as well as Carl Fuchs, 'Cello Professor at the Royal Manchester College of Music. The organisation was typical of any English School of Music with choral, orchestral, operatic and chamber music departments and it prepared students for the examinations of the Associated Board of the R.A.M and R.C.M., and also for the degrees of A.R.C.M. and L.R.C.M. One of Bainton's first steps as Principal, at some financial risk to himself, was to move his school to larger premises at 72 Jesmond Road on the corner of Victoria Square. In 1937 it moved nearby to an even larger building but the occupation was to be short-lived. Neither of these premises exist today, the former was demolished to make way for the motorway and on the site of the latter now stands Jesmond Metro Station.

Bainton was to be connected with the Conservatoire for more than 30 years, a period not without incident. In 1914 whilst he was en-route for Bayreuth he was interned in a camp in Ruhleben, where he was to remain for the duration of the war. In his absence his wife ran the Conservatoire and even continued the chamber concerts. His time in the prison camp turned out to be a period of great creative and practical musical activity, not only for Bainton, himself, who was placed in charge of all the music at the camp, but also for a number of other musicians interned there, including amongst others Carl Fuchs (Principal cellist of the Halle Orchestra) and Edward Clark, a colleague from Newcastle who had been studying with Schoenberg in Berlin. Bainton formed his own Madrigal Group, known as the Magpies, played occasional concertos and supervised the taking of degree examinations in the camp, which the Germans sent to London to be assessed! After the war, in poor health, Bainton returned to Newcastle, via Amsterdam, where he conducted two concerts of English music with either the Concertgebouw or the Amsterdam-Mengelberg Orchestra (opinions vary) and resumed normal life as Principal of the Newcastle Conservatoire. In 1930, however, he began touring extensively, visiting India, Canada and Australia, where he obviously made an impression on the governing body of the New South Wales Conservatorium at Sydney and they offered him a directorship, which he accepted in 1934.

It is said that Bainton left behind an organization which had contributed considerably to the musical life of Newcastle and district. He had at one time a panel of outstanding teachers, all prominent names in the history of music in the North East and some of whom went on to achieve wider recognition such as W.G.Whittaker, a native of Newcastle, who left the Conservatoire in 1929 to become the 1<sup>st</sup> Gardiner Professor of Music at the University of Glasgow and Principal of the Royal Academy of Music in Glasgow. Carl Fuchs, whom I have already mentioned; principal cellist with the Halle Orchestra and Professor of music in Manchester, who also taught in Huddersfield and after a day in Newcastle would teach half a day in York on his way home. Some few others by name were A.M.Wall, (violin), Dr Hutchinson, William Ellis (St Nicholas'

Cathedral organist) who was awarded a Lambeth Doctorate in Music, Miss Elsie Winstanley (piano) who did Stirling work as resident pianist at the Laing Art Gallery Lunch Time Concerts during WWII. and Arthur Milner, (piano and choral class) who at some time was also vice-Principal and in 1927 took charge of music teaching at the Royal Grammar School, making the school notable for its fine musical activity.

Why the Conservatoire failed is a difficult one to answer, it had all the makings of a permanent school of music for the North East. The beginning of the end seems to have been when Bainton invited Dr Leslie Russell, music adviser for the Kent County Education Committee, whom he had probably met in connection with his work as an examiner, to be his successor. A slap in the face for those who worked with him at the Conservatoire, but maybe Bainton considered that the Conservatoire needed new ideas and a new outlook, not available locally. It would be an understatement to say that some of the staff were disappointed at the decision. The press notice announcing the start of the summer term on 5<sup>th</sup> April 1934 mentioned that '*new classes included a Children's percussion band, Dalcroze Eurhythmics, folk dancing and pipes (both making and playing)*'. This clearly seemed to indicate an enterprising new broom which was confirmed by a further announcement in September that the '*Prospectus is completely re-designed, with particulars of many new courses*'. Notwithstanding, Dr Russell, who was a highly disciplined and competent musician went on to widen the scope of the Conservatoire, but his efforts were of little avail and on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 1938 the Newcastle Journal announced that the Conservatoire was to close. No reason was given but it seems likely that the Conservatoire was underfunded, it had no influential committee of management and no subsidy from private or public funds and at that particular time in history the national economy had deteriorated and a career in music was rather a bleak outlook.

The Newcastle Conservatoire was a bold attempt to establish a school of music in the town and had it succeeded it would today be on a par with those schools successfully established in other larger industrial towns. Its demise was a sad day for music in the North East but during its lifetime it had a stimulating effect on musical activity in the city. However, whilst it was the most comprehensive school of its kind in the North East it was not the only attempt to found a musical educational centre within the town. Around the 1880s a Miss Hildegard Werner, a Swedish lady and minor composer, living in the town, set up the High School of Music in Northumberland Street. It appears to have been an all ladies establishment with some notable patrons. The school had an all ladies string orchestra that gave Invitation concerts in the Barras Bridge Assembly Rooms, mentioned in an earlier chapter. A programme from this period dated 1892 states that it is the 10<sup>th</sup> Invitation Concert to be given in the upper suite of the Assembly Rooms by the Mignon String Orchestra and comprises a programme of songs, solos and string pieces. Miss Werner died in 1911. In 1894 Mr T.A.Alderson, whom we met when reviewing the choral societies, was listing himself in the Newcastle Directory as Principal of the Northumberland College of

Music at 125 Northumberland Street, above the premises of Alderson & Brentnall, music shop, which had opened in the 1870s. Then there was the St John School of Music and Dramatic Art that opened with such a flourish in 1934 but made no impact, and the Sherbourne School of Music and Dramatic Art at Swinburn Place, which taught for a number of years under Miss M.F.Sherbourne.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

### NEWCASTLE PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA

'An Association has been formed in Newcastle for the purpose of giving Concerts of the best Orchestral Music. It is proposed that during the coming season four matinee Concerts should be given by the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra under the conductorship of Mr Edgar L. Bainton.'

This was the opening paragraph in a notice put out in 1911 announcing a series of concerts by the newly formed Philharmonic Orchestra comprised of around fifty professional musicians. The movement leading to the establishment of the orchestra began in the previous year when Mr Rogers, conductor of the Tyne Theatre Orchestra, was asked by some members of the band to institute rehearsals for the purpose of practising good music. As a result of these rehearsals an invitation concert was given on Thursday, May 12<sup>th</sup> 1910. The programme included Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Sir William Sterndale Bennet's Overture 'The Naiades', and the Hungarian March from Berloiz' 'Faust' and was so successful that it encouraged the idea of placing the orchestra on a more permanent footing. A provisional committee was formed and for the season of 1910-11 a series of three orchestral concerts was given in the Tyne Theatre. The first programme included Haydn's 'Clock' Symphony and Mendelssohn's 'Hebrides' Overture and subsequent programmes included Brahm's Third Symphony, Wagner's 'Siegfried Idyll', Stanford's First Irish Rhapsody and Schubert's C Major Symphony. The press welcomed this new venture, which the following review testifies and I make no apologies for quoting it in full:

*'The announcement of the formation of another orchestral organisation for Newcastle suggest the adage 'It never rains but it pours'. Only a fortnight has elapsed since I announced the formation of the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra and now comes the news that the local theatre players have banded themselves together under the title of the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra with Mr E. J. Rogers as their conductor. At the annual concert under the auspices of the Amalgamated Musicians' Union, and also at the Good Friday concerts given in the Theatre Royal during the past few years, these players have shown genuine musical ability and temperament and many local musicians have expressed the wish to me that this fine body could be brought together on more frequent occasions. At the time of writing this paragraph I am in the dark as to the aim and objects of the new organisation but if present expectations are realised, my impressions of the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra, who gave their inaugural concert yesterday, will be found recorded in another part of this mornings issue.'*

*There is surely no need to insist – as I am now almost tired of doing, and as I am afraid my readers must be getting tired of hearing – upon the necessity of the establishment of permanent orchestras in Newcastle and other provincial centres. The artistic value of these organisations cannot be over-estimated and their formation is one of the signs of healthy progression of the musical art in our midst. In a recent article, Dr Cummings emphasised the importance of this side of our artistic development. “The multiplication of orchestras and orchestral performances”, he said, “has educated the British public to an extent which our forefathers never dreamed could be possible. Time was when the idea prevailed that the voice and verse was everything; that music only filled its noblest functions when the instrumental was restricted to the illustration of the vocal text; but now many have come to recognise the fact that the highest music is language not translatable into words nor confined to a programme. The waves of sound which flow from the orchestra may be presentations of the communing of the soul of the genius composer with the heaven from which it came and to which it will return. “To many of us orchestral music is the highest form in which the art can be presented to the ear and imagination, and the formation of two new orchestras in the metropolis of the north is a matter for congratulation. I wish them both well.’*

The press review that followed the concert is no less interesting, and revealing in its criticism of Newcastle’s attitude towards musical culture.

*‘Since the days when the late Sir Charles Halle brought his famous band to the city and gave annually a series of orchestral concerts Newcastle has occupied an unworthy place amongst provincial cities so far as this class of musical enterprise is concerned. In recent years we have been indebted principally to outside aid for the few orchestral concerts which musicians have been privileged to hear, and while they have certainly been of superlative excellence, no one will pretend they have been at all adequate to the needs of so large a community. The very excellence of those which have been given has only accentuated our orchestral poverty. Within the past few weeks, however, some interesting developments have taken place. The formation of the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra has been announced and yesterday saw the debut at the Tyne Theatre of the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra: and if these organisations are guided by the right sort of enterprise and supported by the musical community in something like an adequate manner, an important step will have been taken towards wiping out the reproach to which Newcastle has been open for a time that has been unduly and unsatisfactorily prolonged. A first class orchestra cannot, of course, be formed in a day, for, as George Eliot says; “The seeds of things are small.”*

The reviewer goes on to praise the orchestra but admits the recital was an occasion for compliments rather than criticism. He expresses some disappointment at learning that a regular series of concerts is not contemplated and the *raison d’être* for the concerts, so far as the musicians were concerned was to provide the opportunity for them to elevate their taste as members of the

theatre orchestras in the district from whose ranks all the players had been drawn. In spite of this, the orchestra flourished and before the First World War an orchestral committee had been formed under Sir Henry Hadow, Principal of Armstrong College and the orchestra began a close association with the Conservatoire. In 1910, upon the resignation of Mr Rogers, the conductorship was taken over by Edgar Bainton (two years before he became Principal of the Conservatoire) and he held the post for twenty four years. In October 1911 the following notice appeared in The Musical Times:

*'An important scheme is the enlargement of the Philharmonic Orchestra and the extension of its activities so as to include four concerts. The syllabus has not yet been issued, but I am able to state that at each concert a symphony will be played, Mozart, Beethoven, Tchaikovsky and Glazounow, being represented this season, and that at each concert one or more works by living British composers will be included. As the additions to the Orchestra comprise some of the best instrumentalists in the district, and a thorough plan of rehearsals has been drawn up by the conductor, Mr. E.J.Bainton, it looks as if the tentative attempts of the last two years to found a local permanent orchestra are likely to produce a scheme pregnant with rich possibilities. One important disadvantage the Orchestra labours under is that so many of its members are unable to get free from theatres and other positions of employment in the evenings and that concerts at present must be given in the afternoons.'*

Upon the resignation of Bainton in 1934 Dr Russell took over the post as conductor. At his debut in the City Hall. he made a speech, which was deemed in the press to be tactless, particularly as it came from a newcomer to the musical scene. Subsequent correspondence in the papers agreed with Dr Russell's view that public support for the orchestra was poor, but not with his view that some of Yehudi Menuhin's programme in a recent Celebrity concert was '*a mere display of technical skill*' (shades of Charles Avison, which makes one wonder if there is not something in the bracing Tyneside air that inspires men to challenge giants) Russell also said that some professional players had not been remunerated for the previous concert which pointed to financial difficulties.

Following the 1914 War the orchestra continued giving four to six concerts a season in the Palace Theatre. Their programmes were made up of the more substantial classical repertoire with liberal helpings of contemporary English music. There was variety in the rest of the programmes made up of more familiar orchestral pieces. A press review headed '*First Post-War Concert in Newcastle*' said that the orchestra was good enough to suggest that in the absence of any further breaks in its continuity of practice, Newcastle would soon have a really first-class orchestral combination of professional musicians, but regretted the absence of a proper place in the city for public music concerts. There was some suggestion that public support could have been better, but most people had to work for their living or were out of work and on the dole and did not have money to spend on tickets for symphony concerts. In any case the admission prices

alone limited attendance at these concerts to the more comfortably off. Consequently, even as early as the 1920s the orchestra was in financial trouble. The following press appeal spells it out:

*'It looks as though Newcastle were going to make a supreme effort to save its only permanent orchestra. The Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra has so far not been appreciated at all commensurate with its merits, and no secret has been made of the fact that it was faced with extinction because of a lamentable languishing of public support. The committee rightly decided to take the public into its confidence, tell them the circumstances, and give them a chance to redeem their past delinquencies and the committee's present deficiencies. They embarked, as a last resort upon two experimental concerts to test, as it were, the extent of the appreciation of orchestral music in Newcastle.*

*The first of these took place in the Palace Theatre last evening and everyone with the best music at heart will be delighted to learn that the experiment promises to prove a signal success. Almost every seat in the spacious theatre was occupied – a condition of affairs at once inspiring to Mr Bainton and his forces and encouraging to the committee, whose only ambition is to provide Newcastle with a permanent professional orchestra not unworthy to be compared to Leeds, Edinburgh, Glasgow and Birmingham. It is a laudable aim, and one which it is hoped will succeed splendidly. Similar support for the second concert on December 11 ought to place the orchestra on that permanent basis which will ensure a regular series of orchestral concerts in Newcastle, a phase of music which has hitherto been unaccountably starved.'*

The orchestra survived its 1920s financial crises, however, and continued giving concerts into the late 1930s. I was unable to ascertain whether or not the orchestra engaged any visiting conductors or big name soloists to perform at their concerts, but I think not. It appears to have been fairly self sufficient in this respect. Perhaps it was a question of funds as fees for visiting artists could mount up. Those they did engage were in the early stages of their careers and would not have demanded large fees; Harriet Cohen, Sidone Goosens and Cyril Smith. On the other hand it may have been that they genuinely felt it was not necessary. Their close association with the Conservatoire gave them access to a range of musical talents; Edgar Bainton, their conductor and Arthur Milner, were both, in their own right, competent soloists. Milner wrote a piano concerto, which was premiered with himself as soloist at one of the Philharmonic concerts.

The press announcement introducing the Philharmonic Orchestra in 1911 said that only a fortnight earlier the author had introduced to the public the **Newcastle Symphony Orchestra**, therefore, I think we can take it that these two orchestras were founded at around the time. However, they were two very different animals, in more ways than one; the Philharmonic being largely professional and male, whilst the Symphony was chiefly made up of amateurs and most of these were ladies. I could trace no records relating to the first twenty years of the Symphony

Orchestra's activities but it was indeed active in 1920 when the following press notice appeared in the Journal:

*'Now that we have got the Town Hall back to concert pitch, the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra has no longer to suffer the indignity of going to Gateshead to give its periodical concerts. Yesterday there was quite a good audience for the matinee, and the programme met with generous and just appreciation. Chiefly composed of amateurs, most of whom are ladies, the Symphony Orchesta has reached a very creditable degree of proficiency and their playing yesterday was marked by cultured musicianship and refinement of phrasing. Their big number came last in the programme, Schubert's Seventh Symphony, and it proved a wholly enjoyable experience to renew acquaintance with this melodious masterpiece. A commendable balance of tone was preserved throughout and the second allegro and the fascinating scherzo were particularly well done. The whole work is full of genuine melodic interest and despite its great length, it was well enough played to sustain interest right to the end. The symphony may be regarded as a fine collection of inspired tunes and Mr Hamilton Harty and his forces deserve high praise for so musicianly a performance.'*

The review continues in similar vein praising the orchestra's playing of Smetana and Wagner, but it is the mention of Hamilton Harty in the earlier part of the piece that lends special interest to this orchestra's activities and sets it apart from its rival, the Philharmonic. In the Tyne and Wear Archives I found one of the Societies Minute Books covering the period 1932 –38, which gave an insight into the orchestra's activities over the period.

**1932 :** 7<sup>th</sup> Sept Meeting expressed concern at the resignations from the Society *'In view of the prevailing depression in the district.'* Regarding booking the City Hall for the forthcoming concert the minutes reflect on *'the difficulty of adequately filling the hall and what steps could be taken to increase public attendance'*.

Leading shops and firms could be asked to interest themselves and their employees in the Society's events.

Blocks of tickets could be issued at reduced prices. The Secretary was asked to consult with Dr Sargent on the matter as it was felt that he would have had valuable experience in that direction.

**1933:** 10<sup>th</sup> April. Dr Sargent arranged a Haydn, Beethoven programme bearing in mind it did not call for additional wind instruments, which adds to the cost. In these difficult times costs should be kept as low as possible.

**1934:** 24<sup>th</sup> May. The question of Entertainment tax came up and it was decided to make the next concert an Invitation Concert to which the general public would not be admitted.

**1936:** 17<sup>th</sup> June. There had been a considerable deficit for the season owing to the Election and the Beecham Concert. Hamilton Harty and John Barbirolli were both approached to conduct the orchestra at a forthcoming concert but withdrew, Malcolm Sargent, who could always be relied upon, accepted and at a reduced fee.

**1938:** December. Malcolm Sargent was asked to come himself to rehearsals and not send his deputy. His name was Reginald Goodall. To save money it was decided to engage no wind but play the wind part on the piano.

The last entry concerned a meeting in the City Hall on 27<sup>th</sup> August 1941 when it was agreed that the orchestra should remain in abeyance during the war.

The above, all too brief, but fascinating glimpse into the problems of running an orchestra in Newcastle in the 1930s is illuminating, even though the organisation was more in the nature of a friendly society committed to making good music and (Entertainment Tax aside) bringing it to the public at least once a year. What I found so interesting was the Society's ability to involve so many outstanding English conductors including Sargent's deputy, the later outstanding, Reginald Goodall. I think the willingness of these conductors to be associated with the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra says much for the orchestra's overall standard. They normally gave only one concert a year but always under a first rate conductor. From 1917 to 1935 they had Hamilton Harty conduct eight times, Henry Wood twice and in 1927 when the orchestra mounted a Beethoven festival over two days they engaged both these conductors at the same time. For a period in the 1920s they had Dr Whittaker, from the Conservatoire as their deputy conductor and during the 1930s Malcolm Sargent appears to have maintained a close association with the orchestra.

In addition to these two semi-permanent orchestras there were two other occasions in the year when the musicians of Newcastle were called upon to form themselves into an orchestra of symphonic proportions and perform at a public concert. This was at the annual concerts organised by the Northern Musicians' Benevolent Society and the Amalgamated Musicians' Union. How long these events had been taking place is difficult to say at this distance in time but the Society concerts probably started about 1889 and the Union's concerts around 1900. The Society had an impressive committee headed up by Sir A.C.Mackenzie, Principal of the Royal Academy of Music, and twenty-seven Vice-Presidents including many influential names from the area. I have no detail on the make up of the Union but they could manage to rustle up an eight-man concert committee when it came to organising the annual event. Both organisations were able to assemble a sizeable symphony orchestra, but whereas the Society seems to have had a degree of success on the night, the Union's performances (judging by first hand comments on a programme for 26<sup>th</sup> September 1915) were pretty awful. A crude comparison of personnel in the orchestras assembled by the Society and the Union shows no more than a half

dozen names appearing in both orchestras. Furthermore, only two names from the Newcastle Philharmonic appear in the list of around two hundred musicians who went to make up the Society's and the Union's orchestras. No women were included, which ruled out most of the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra personnel. This generally serves to highlight further the general attitude towards women in orchestras at this time but also points to the fact that there must have been a goodly number of professional and amateur musicians in the town in the early part of the last century. This once again prompts the question why was Newcastle not able to form a permanent orchestra when it appears to have had the resources. The Northern Musician's Benevolent Society, as early as 1896, was proposing more frequent meetings of the orchestra members for practice, which it considered would be a step towards the realisation of the original intention of the promoters of the Society, viz., the establishment of a permanent orchestra.

The Newcastle Conservatoire, The Newcastle Philharmonic and the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra did not survive WWII, which is not very surprising. However that in no way diminishes the valuable contribution of those involved in these ventures and their pioneering efforts, in the face of general philistinism, to raise musical standards within the town and establish a musical culture. But it was not to be and it would take more than another half century for their hopes and dreams to be realised.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

### END OF A GOLDEN AGE

An article in the Musical Times, published around the time of the First World War regretted that the war had brought about a deterioration in musical tastes. It said that there was plenty of music but what audiences sought was show and flourish, and theatrical glitter, and were pleased to applaud when they got it. It claimed that general taste had gone back thirty years, when the only interest in a programme lay in the number of popular performers, not in the choice of works, and the article concluded, *'audiences' had unwittingly changed'*. I think the author was probably commenting, with some regret, on the passing of the old musical order, but it is a fact that cultural standards, if unchecked, do drop in times of war. But then in uncertain times the general public seek escapism not soul searching symphonic works: When separated by war what is Beethoven's Ninth compared to a simple tune linked to a specific time and place and memory of a loved one. Regardless of the war, however, the many worthy music societies, that had been the mainstay of musical life up until then were dying. Musical interests were becoming less provincial with touring London theatre companies, visiting professional orchestras under conductors who were stamping their own personalities on the performances. It was becoming less a question of whose symphony it was but more a matter of whose interpretation it was. Choral singing was still very popular in the north but raised standards and the fact that people were finding other ways of spending their leisure time was having its effect. The brass band movement was surviving well although its peak had been in the 1890s, when country-wide there had been around 40,000 bands. The movement, however, had organised itself nationally and established a centre for brass band competition at Belle Vue in Manchester. That other mainstay of working class enjoyment, the Music Hall, had long been on the wane, giving way to the more stylish and comfortable variety theatres. During the war and even after it was at the theatres that people found the escapism they were seeking, but the early cinema, the rising popularity of the gramophone, together with the rise of popular music and above all jazz were also claiming attention. However, there was one Newcastle musician who successfully raised musical standards in the city at this period and that was Dr W.G. Whittaker, Mus. Bac., F.R.C.O. In 1915 he founded the Bach Choir, which was to claim recognition beyond the banks of the Tyne and attract the attention of many of the country's leading composers. By 1922 it was taking part in a three-day festival in London and by 1927 was appearing in Germany. The choir also performed at St Margaret's Westminster and at Oxford. Dr Whittaker became one of England's leading choral conductors and an authority on Bach. In 1914 he was already doing his bit for the war effort by mounting a Grand War Relief Music Festival at St. James' Park Football Ground, where a choir and orchestra of one thousand two hundred and fifty performed favourite

choruses from 'The Messiah' and 'Elijah' as well as choral numbers by Elgar, Parry, Villiers and Stanford plus, in what was billed as a *Grand Orchestral Programme*.

Immediately following the Armistice the town, musically speaking, was soon back in business, especially the theatres that had helped keep up spirits during the darker times. The local theatres enjoyed great success featuring London touring musical productions, which were very much in vogue in the 1920s. The Theatre Royal, the Empire and the Hippodrome presented continuous runs of musical plays, song and dance shows and musical comedy reviews. The music from many of these shows is still as popular today, whilst their original stars are shadowy figures of the past known only to a handful of musical theatre buffs. Titles such as 'Madame Pompadour', 'Lilac Time' and 'The Merry Widow' graced the bill boards of the Theatre Royal, whilst the Empire Theatre competed with, 'Mr Tower of London', a musical review and The Hippodrome on Northumberland Road attracted the crowds with, 'Our Nell' a musical play with Jose Collins, 'Little Nelly Kelly', a song and dance show, 'Hollywood Follies', an American musical burlesque, 'The Arcadians' with its 'Merry Merry Pipes of Pan', so beloved of Drawing Room sopranos, and the spectacular musical success of its day, Theatre Royal, Drury Lane's production of 'Rose Marie'. However it was not all froth and treacle at the Royal and the Hippodrome and opera in English was also in vogue.

Opera in English, as distinct from English opera had been attempted with a degree of success before the British National Opera Company was formed in the 1920s. There was Moody-Manners and the Quinlan Company, who had mounted Wagner's 'Ring' cycle in 1913. There was also The Carl Rosa Opera that toured opera in English around the provinces for best part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, introducing me, and I am sure a whole generation of budding opera lovers, to live performances of the popular operas, and at gallery prices we could afford. But the BNOC, as it became known, was on a much higher artistic level. It had been founded by the conductor, Thomas Beecham, after his earlier successful ventures into opera in English in 1909. The company engaged the finest British singers of the time and the performances were conducted by Barbirolli, Boult, Sargent or Beecham, himself. The repertoire was adventurous for the time and the Hippodrome saw performances of 'Otello' by Verdi, 'The Golden Cockerill' by Rimsky-Korsakov, with double bills comprising 'Cav' and 'Pag' and 'Coffee & Cupid' by Bach with 'Hugh The Drover' by Vaughan Williams. In 1926 the company brought Wagner's 'Parsifal' and Gounod's 'Romeo and Juliet' to Newcastle. The town relied on visiting opera companies, local opera enterprises never met with any success, and even the BNOC was eventually forced into liquidation by the want of official help, which prior to WWII was not forthcoming. In addition to opera there was the occasional visiting celebrity and the Newcastle Philharmonic continued to give concerts at the Palace Theatre. The Musical Times reported that it '*Simply rained performances of 'The Messiah' in Newcastle as though no other Christmas music had ever been written*' and again lamented

the fact that the town did not have a suitable concert hall. But by the end of the decade the town had two purpose built halls, one permanent and one temporary; the permanent structure designed as an all purpose hall replacing the derelict and inadequate concert room in the old Town Hall and the temporary construction; the Festival Hall, was erected in Exhibition Park, and put up at great expense to last no more than a matter of months.

The one big event of the 1920s was The North East Coast Exhibition, which took place in 1929. It was not specifically a musical event but as music played such a large part in the exhibition programme I think it deserves our attention in more ways than one. Sir Arthur Lambert, Lord Mayor of Newcastle, 1927 –1929, as chairman of the Exhibition Committee was responsible for organising the musical events. Sir Arthur said that from the outset he had not the slightest doubt in his own mind that the most promising attraction for the indoor concerts was a string orchestra, with military and brass bands to play outside. He called together a representative committee of experienced *musical amateurs*, and they agreed that an orchestra would be essential, if it could be afforded. There was, of course, a Concert Hall to be built, which needed a big stage, half a dozen ante-rooms and seating capacity for 1,400, but it would only be needed for five and a half months. The problem seems to have been solved on the 'old boy net' by peering backwards. The father of Captain H.G. Amers had been Musical Director to the Royal Jubilee Exhibition in 1887 and it seemed appropriate, therefore, that his son should be approached. Amers, junior, who at the time was in Eastbourne was approached and was able to be released from his engagement with the Eastbourne Corporation for most of the summer. Consequently he was appointed Honorary Musical Director. He brought the Eastbourne Municipal Orchestra with him and as they could play in the orchestral or military style it was unanimously concluded that this was the ideal arrangement. The suggestion to engage a permanent band was it seems vigorously opposed at the outset in certain quarters on the grounds that there was an urgent need for constant freshness and change of attraction and also because the engagement would mortgage such a big proportion of the quota of expenditure estimated for music.

The musical arrangements it seems were successful and more than justified the confidence of the Music Committee. There were no fewer than 54 orchestral concerts in all and the programmes were arranged with such a perfect flair for gauging the taste of the public that they flocked nightly in crowds to the Festival Hall and on many occasions the kiosks were *besieged by surging throngs clamouring for tickets* for concerts, which, it is said, were exactly similar in type to the Queen's Hall "Proms" in London. Of the 54 concerts some were designated 'special' and these included a Symphony Concert (orchestra unspecified) conducted by Sir Thomas Beecham, a concert by Mr McConnell Wood's Choir, performances by various other local choirs and massed choirs, the Newcastle and Gateshead Choral Union doing Berlioz's 'Faust', concert versions of 'Tom Jones' and 'Merrie England' by the Tyneside Operatic Societies and a performance of 'The Messiah' given by the Y.M.C.A. Choral Society conducted

by The Lord Mayor. In addition there were symphony concerts conducted by Capt. Amers that featured distinguished soloists including Arthur de Greef, Solomon and Edgar Bainton; pianists, and Marie Wilson, Sonia Moldawski and Alfred Wall; violinists. There were eighteen military bands engaged over the period and twenty-two colliery and works bands. Two brass band contests were held with the generous support of the Newcastle Chronicle and proved a great success. At the end of the contest the massed bands were conducted by the Mayor, who said, '*one hundred trombones swelling out the bass line of the hymn tune, 'Eventide' with the other harmonies blending in sympathetic volume, brought a thrill to the spine of all who heard it*'.

The City Hall, centrally located on Northumberland Road, became Newcastle's main concert venue almost from the moment it was opened, although strictly speaking it was constructed as a general purpose hall and not specifically as a concert hall. Musically speaking it appears to have got off to a slow start but we do know that in 1929 the YMCA Choral Society performed Handel's 'Messiah' in the hall and in 1931 the Glasgow Orpheus Choir appeared under its conductor Hugh Roberton. There followed a series of International Celebrity Concerts throughout the 1930s with visits by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra under Furtwaengler, playing Bach, Beethoven, Wagner and Richard Strauss, and the London Symphony Orchestra conducted by Mengleberg and Beecham. The London Philharmonic Orchestra played also under Sir Thomas Beecham and the Prague Philharmonic Orchestra directed by Rafael Kubelik played a Czech programme. A young Yehudi Menuhin, before becoming internationally known through his appearance in a Hollywood musical film, gave a recital, as did Ida Haendel, violinist, who appeared on the same bill as a soprano called, Beniamina Pinza, of whom I can find no trace but might have been the daughter of the great bass, Ezio Pinza. The famous Negro singer, actor and film star, Paul Robeson, who unfortunately blighted his career through his Communist leanings, gave a recital and would return again. There were concerted operatic recitals by mixed groups of singers, one of which was particularly notable with singers Eva Turner, Sabine Kalter, Dino Borgioli and John Brownlee. Solomon, the concert pianist appeared under the auspices of the North of England Pianoforte Society (1936) and a few months before the outbreak of World War II Malcolm Sargent conducted perhaps the last concert by the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra in a programme of music by Elgar, Cesar Franck and Dvorak.

The new hall did not have the monopoly on the best of classical music in town; however, this was to be heard at the Assembly Rooms where the Chamber Music Society were still holding their concerts. By 1927 they had reached their 37<sup>th</sup> season, when Madam Suggia, the cellist made immortal by Augustus John, the artist, who painted her playing her cello in 1923. gave a recital. Myra Hess and Jelly D'Aranyi gave a violin and piano recital together in December 1937 playing sonatas by Beethoven, Brahms and Cesar Franck. They appeared together many times as a duo pre war and were close personal friends yet whilst D'Aranyi acknowledged the friendship and devoted a whole chapter to it in her

biography, Hess' biographer, who claims to have had access to her private papers, makes no reference whatsoever to D'Aranyi as though the omission were deliberate at Hess' request. Jelly D'Aranyi had a number of associations with Newcastle and possibly made her British debut in the town. She came to Newcastle first as a young woman with a friend of Sir Andrew Noble of Vickers Armstrongs and he engaged Jelly and her sister to play at a chamber concert. According to her biographer she never forgot the double-decker trams in Newcastle. The D'Aranyi sisters were always willing to appear for charities. They were neither socialists nor slummers but they were never unaware of peoples' hardships and the deterioration of the common working man's standards in the 1920s. This prompted Jelly to tour England giving free concerts in churches at which collections were taken. She kept it up for years appearing in Newcastle a number of times. The Dean of Newcastle wrote to her saying "This house and our Cathedral have been blessed by having you". Her tours were called a 'Pilgrimage of Compassion' but by 1933 the concerts in draughty and unheated venues were taking a toll on her health and in a sense were the destruction of her.

Artur Rubinstein gave a piano recital in November 1938 and in the 1946/47 Season that renowned partnership ,Pierre Bernac, French Baritone and Francis Poulenc, the composer, appeared in programme of French Song. Greatest of all, however, was the appearance of Sergei Rachmaninoff on the 19<sup>th</sup> March 1935 in the following varied programme of piano music.

Sonata in D, Op. 10 No 3.....	Beethoven
Sonata in B minor, Op 35.....	Chopin
Sonatas in D major and F minor.....	Scarlatti
Ballade in G minor.....	Brahms
Moment Musical.....	Rachmaninoff
Prelude in G.....	Rachmaninoff
Oriental Sketch.....	Rachmaninoff
Etude-Caprice de Concert F minor.....	Dohnanyi.

There is evidence to show that the Chamber Music Society continued until 1948 reaching its 56<sup>th</sup> Season. It retained an almost 19<sup>th</sup> century quality, as though time had stood still, even as late as 1938 a note at the bottom of a programme reads, *'To facilitate egress at the close of the Concert, the audience is requested not to block the doors but to wait in the Vestibule until the Carriages are called.'* The very last vestiges of a way of life that within a year would be swept away forever. For those readers who care about such things I would suggest a stroll along Percy Street to the point at which it joins Leazes Park Road, where on the upper part of the corner building there is still to be seen, perhaps the last remaining reference to the carriage trade, in the words, 'T HOWE & Co. Carriage Proprietors'

Beyond the comforts of the City Hall and the Assembly Rooms there was opera at the Theatre Royal and the Palace Theatres. Not on such a grand scale as before, but by companies with impressive titles such as the Universal Grand Opera Co Ltd, and the International Grand Opera Co. Whilst a seat in the new City Hall might cost as much as two shillings (10p) it was possible to get into the 'Gods' at the Palace Theatre for an opera performance for three pence (1.5p). In the 1930s the Palace Theatre presented 'The Immortal Hour' by Rutland Boughton (1878-1960), his only successful operatic work, later described as '*one of those excursions into escapism whose magic defied revival*'. 'The Faery Song' from this music drama remained a great favourite throughout the 1940s in a recording by the tenor, Webster Booth. For those who demanded more colour and romance in the theatre there were performances of 'the Chocolate Soldier' by Oscar Straus at the Empire Theatre and almost yearly revivals of 'Lilac Time' (the musical base loosely on Schubert's music) at the Royal. For serious music lovers there was the Bach Festival on 9<sup>th</sup>-14<sup>th</sup> April 1935 in the King's Hall of Armstrong College and the occasional concert by the Armstrong College Choral and Orchestral Society. Celebrations and other special events featuring music were also taking place during this inter war period. There was the Coronation of the King George VI and Queen Elizabeth in May 1937 when a full programme of music was officially organised in the afternoons and evenings featuring various local bands in all the parks, in and around the town. In 1936 and 1937 there were Brighter Homes Exhibitions, with musical entertainment by the Royal Marines Band under Major P.S.G.O'Donnell and F.Lionel Johns and his Broadcasting Orchestra, which was a sign of the times.

An anonymous programme I discovered in the archives referred to a series of concerts in October 1932 by The Light Symphony Orchestra conducted by Percival Goffin. Goffin was a native of the town and musical director at the Theatre Royal, but few had any idea of the colourful life he had led as a musician. As a young man he had toured the world as accompanist to such artists as, Melba, Kubelik, Peter Dawson, John Coates and Albert Sammons. In the 1914-18 War, so the story goes, he ended up in Palestine, where he arranged concerts for the troops. Lord Allenby sent for him and said, "Goffin, I have taken the Opera House at Cairo for you and I want you to run concerts there for the Red Cross". Goffin replied "Sir!", saluted, and went off to see the opera house which turned out to be bigger even than Covent Garden. Undaunted he set about his task and managed to find plenty of good material among the men of Allenby's Army. It says much for his organising ability that lady Allenby's Red Cross Fund benefited by £10,000. Goffin returned to Whitley Bay and organised a series of Celebrity Concerts but in the end he was defeated by the cinema. Live music making in Newcastle also suffered as a result of the growth in popularity of radio, the cinema, gramophone records and improved travel, but it was more than that. The main thrust – the musical promise and commitment that had seemed to be there, at the turn of the Twentieth Century had evaporated and the town's ability to maintain its own musical culture was slowly but surely fading.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

### CULTURE AT A PRICE

Unlike the First World War a conscious effort was made to uphold cultural standards in the Second and after the initial panic, when all places of entertainment were closed, a body calling itself the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts (CEMA) was independently founded. Through the auspices of this organisation concerts were made possible even through the darkest days of the war and gave many people their first taste of music and the arts. One of the ways in which Newcastle benefited musically was through a series of lunchtime concerts held in the Laing Art Gallery. Using an art gallery for musical events was a break with tradition but proved very popular. This wartime concert series ran from 1941 until 1947. The story of the Laing Art Gallery, itself, is very interesting and serves as a further indication of how little regard the town had for the Arts in general, prior to its cultural rebirth in the 1950s. Newcastle gained the gallery not through any desire on the part of the City Council or its citizens but because of a wealthy man in the liquor trade who in 1904 was public spirited enough to realize what the town needed and was unlikely to get at its present rate of progress. The gallery was largely stocked from private sources and even by 1940 Newcastle had spent comparatively little on its art gallery for the purchase of masterpieces. A bitter comment by an observant newspaper man shortly before the outbreak of the war summed up the situation:

*'This lack of dignity in our towns (Newcastle and Gateshead) has been only too painfully obvious for years. Why they sold their well-nigh priceless treasures from the Mansion House, and apparently thought little of what they were doing. The castle was allowed to fall into ruin and decay. The city walls have been allowed to melt away. It is a wonder someone has not suggested the Castle or the Cathedral as likely site for a new Super Cinema.'*

The first curator of the gallery, Bernard Stevenson, from Nottingham, who had been appointed in 1904, was still in post in 1941. He was described at the time as a clever man, an art expert and an authority on many things besides. It was said that the well filled, beautifully arranged galleries were a tribute to his genius and that the success of the Laing Art Gallery was the story of his work. It was he who put out the notice introducing the lunch time concerts to be held at the gallery, at the same time expressing the hope that if the series proved a success they would become a permanent feature of life in the city. But how long is

permanent? Wartime restrictions applied at these concerts, which took place on Thursdays (later Fridays) from 1.15 to 2.0pm. and the notice pointed out that owing to the strictness of rationing, it would be impossible to provide a full canteen for concert-goers, but that tea would be served, and patrons were invited to bring sandwiches or other suitable refreshment. As with the National Gallery concerts in London these informal weekly concerts were a wonderful opportunity of hearing good music and were open to anyone and everyone who could spare the time.

The mainstay of these mid-day concerts, were solo piano recitals and the list of names of those who played over six years reads like a 'Who Was Who' on the English piano circuit at the time. The one constant factor was Elsie Winstanley from the Newcastle Conservatoire, who seems to have been the resident accompanist, soloist and possibly many other things at a time when everyone was 'expected to do their bit' In addition to the piano recitals were song recitals, quartets, trios and even a quintet and a wide range of music was covered given the limited resources available. Kathleen Ferrier appeared twice in 1942 and Isobel Baillie gave a varied song recital in 1947, of works by Arne, Purcell, Bach, Schumann, Schubert, Grieg, Delius and Hamilton Harty. In March 1946 there was a programme (well ahead of its time) of old music on old instruments: Lute, Viol and Voila d'Amore, at which members of the audience were invited to inspect the instruments after the concert. The Bach Choir performed in 1942 under J.A.Westrup, Professor of Music in the University of Oxford. The final concert in the series was a piano recital by Ella Pounder, who played a Haydn sonata, Rhapsodies and Intermezzi by Brahms, Prelude in C by Prokofieff and a Chopin Ballade. The recital was of no great significance in itself but it marked the end of this experiment. It was an experiment that did not fulfil Mr Stevenson's highest hopes and proved unsustainable for whatever reason but I feel sure he would have derived some satisfaction from the fact that his Lunch Time Concerts lasted one year longer than those at the National Gallery, London.

In researching this period of Newcastle's musical history I was amazed to find how much music making was actually going on around me in Newcastle in those early war years. At the time music was something I only listened to on gramophone records, on the wireless and in Technicolor soundbytes at the cinema. No one told me that the London Philharmonic Orchestra were performing twice nightly at the Empire Theatre, conducted by Malcolm Sargent on weekdays and on Saturdays by Basil Cameron, who was Basil Hindenberg before he was advised to change his German name to Cameron. Nor did anyone mention that the Carl Rosa Opera Co were helping maintain wartime spirits at the Theatre Royal, as also were the visiting Sadlers Wells opera and ballet companies. Another opera group of touring singers and musicians calling themselves the Albion Opera Co. were also appearing at the Theatre Royal and in 1942 mounted a wartime production of Offenbach's 'Tales of Hoffman' starring Peter Peers and Victoria Sladen with an orchestra conducted by Walter Susskind, who had escaped from Czechoslovakia. Meanwhile at the City Hall the

London Symphony and the Halle Orchestras gave concerts with solo artists, Clifford Curzon, Louis Kentner, Moiseiwitsch, Leon Goossens and Eileen Joyce. If the programmes erred on the popular side, it was to be expected. Many of them were in aid of something or other. 1942 saw the fourth series of the 'National People's Concerts' and there was 'Anglo-Soviet Week', when the North East Regional Orchestra gave concerts of mostly Russian pieces with Elgar's 'Chanson de Matin' and 'Chanson de Nuit' squeezed in between them. One programme from this series lists Grieg's Fourth Piano Concerto - wartime disinformation perhaps? In this same year there was also the 'Holidays at Home Drive' with a full programme of events in what was described as a gala week; 20 -27<sup>th</sup> June, with bowls, tennis, putting, donkey rides, beach huts and wireless programmes. But there was also live music by bands; military, brass and dance, featuring Wetherell's Accordion Band, the National Fire Service Pipes, and the Drums and Pipers and Sword Dancers of the Cameronians. . Even the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra resurrected itself and gave a performance (one of many during the war period) of Edward German's 'Merrie England' with the People's Concert Chorus of 300 voices and the popular tenor, Frank Titterton as Sir Walter Raleigh. Stirring stuff indeed. Programmes of the period clearly displayed, 'AIR RAID SHELTERS at Barras Bridge, Northumberland Road and Saville Row. but one lived with danger in those days and it often took more than a few bombs to move an audience.

The National Philharmonic – a wartime creation - came to Newcastle in 1943 for one week and presented a different programme every night with a matinee on the Saturday. The entertainment equivalent of CEMA, known as ENSA (jokingly referred to as 'Every night something awful') by arrangement with the Ministry of Labour and National Service presented symphony concerts for war workers. Under this banner workers were treated to concerts in the work place such as that given by the Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra under Maurice Miles in a programme of music by Beethoven, Elgar, Rimsky-Korsakov and Mozart. This was indeed music for the people but it had taken a world war to make it happen. . Meanwhile, slightly higher up the social scale from the cloth caps and headscarves, in the Prince of Wales' Rooms in the County Hotel, the Newcastle Glee and Madrigal Society were continuing to meet regularly as usual and not far away in Blakett Street at the Connaught Rooms, the Insurance Institute Music Society were to be commended for maintaining artistic standards with song recitals that included music by Bach, Chopin, Roger Quilter, John Ireland, Frank Bridge and Vaughan-Williams. In 1944 there were special weeks in aid of the war effort and April of that year saw 'Salute the Soldier Week', when massed bands at the Palace Theatre played programmes to rally the National spirit with suitable works that included the March Slav and the 1812 Overture by Tchaikovsky and, of course, 'Land of Hope and Glory'. The Royal Navy had to have its turn and consequently 'Warship Week' followed with daily concerts of music. The official programme for 'Warship Week' carried such slogans as 'Save for Britain or Slave for Hitler' – 'They Also Serve Who Save' and '£ the Enemy for all You are Worth'.

The end of the hostilities heralded a return to touring artists and eventually a more regular pattern to the concert life in the city, but the rise of the cinema, improved recording standards and increased record sales captured more and more people's interests and as a result live classical and operatic musical events suffered; there were often vacant seats at the City Hall, even for what one would call special musical events. It was also particularly noticeable that Newcastle had all but died in the artistic sense. The organisations that had sought to uphold musical standards within the town were gone, or dormant, and what was left in their place was mostly amateurs struggling valiantly to hold on to the town's musical traditions. Visiting professional artists raised expectations as did radio and recordings and music lovers began demanding and expecting only the best and were dismissive of anything else. My introduction to concert going was through Newcastle's amateur organisations. My first concert was by the King's College Choral and Orchestral Society – it was their eightieth – I was thrilled but the playing was probably only competent. If my memory serves me correctly, however, it was better than my second concert a week later when I attended the Northumberland Orchestral Society's annual concert at the City Hall. Looking again at the programme after fifty-six years I see that the orchestra comprised mostly ladies in the string section; refugees from the Newcastle Symphony Orchestra no doubt. There were also three of my Post Office colleagues on brass and French horn. Weeks later in the City Hall I attended my first professional concert by the Amsterdam Concertgebouw under its conductor Eduard van Beinum, when they played Wagner's Overture, 'Die Meistersinger' and Tchaikovsky's 'Pathétique' Symphony. This one experience was to change my life forever.

Concert life in the city became a combination of orchestral concerts sponsored by what had by then become the Arts Council, and Celebrity Concerts promoted by a number of impresarios who were active at the time; Harold Holt, Harold Fielding, Gorkinsky and two mavericks Eugene Iskoldoff and Lynford-Joel Productions, whom we shall return to later. The big name impresarios presented, in the immediate post war period, artists who were English or from the Commonwealth. The BBC Northern Orchestra came to town under Sir Thomas Beecham, back from America. Beecham would return to Newcastle often and he could always be relied upon to entertain with his devilish wit even before he raised his baton and frequently after. The London Philharmonic, The Royal Philharmonic and one of those short lived wartime bands, the London International Orchestra all played at the City Hall in this period. By the later 1940s and moving into the 1950s there was a regular flow of orchestras and artists. The year 1947 saw visits by Claudio Arrau, the Chilean pianist, Jussi Bjorling, Swedish tenor from the Metropolitan Opera, New York and the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra with Raphael Kubelik. The following year, Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> October, saw the first post war visit of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra conducted – not by Furtwangler (politically dubious) or by Karajan (even more so) but by Sergiu Celibidache, who had been very carefully chosen as he was Romanian and politically 'squeaky clean' so to speak. Emotions were still running

high at this period and the audience must have had very mixed feelings. The concert tour was billed as a Charity Concert sponsored by Christian Action an organisation promoting friendship and understanding in Europe. There was much need of it in those days. The year after, 1949, Harold Holt brought Eugene Ormandy and the Philadelphia Orchestra to Newcastle. It was at that time generally considered the greatest orchestra in the world, made famous by Leopold Stokowski and in the eyes of the record buying public the two were inseparable. In fact Stokowski had resigned his conductorship of the orchestra in 1937. This may have had a bearing on the fact that the orchestra's tour of the UK was not a success. (I attended three of their concerts in the Harringay Arena, London and there were more seats empty than occupied). Paul Robeson sang again in Newcastle in March 1949. He was a giant of a man with a very deep and powerful voice, but the gentleness and sincerity of the man was captured in the voice. He had a habit of singing with one hand pressed over his ear. Beniamino Gigli, generally considered the successor to Enrico Caruso also sang at the City Hall. Caruso and he were as unlike each other in voice as in nature – Gigli had a reputation for meanness matching that of Caruso for generosity. Gigli's voice, however, was unique, his golden tones were unlike any other tenor then or now and to hear him live (recordings never truly captured the full beauty of the voice) was a thrilling experience. He was generous with his encores in concert but mastered the trick of slipping away in his car whilst his audience were still seated and clamouring for more. As a keen young autograph hunter I once tried to beat him at his game only to see the tail end of his car vanish down the road whilst the audience were still cheering in the hall. Ballet lovers were also given a rare treat during this period when in 1946 at the Theatre Royal the Sadlers Wells Ballet presented a one week programme of one act ballets with a whole host of leading dancers including a young Beryl Grey, Moira Shearer (the red haired beauty from Glasgow and star of the outstanding British film 'The Red Shoes') and the most famous ballerina of her generation, Margot Fonteyn.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

### NEW BEGINNINGS

Concert life in Newcastle by the 1950s fell into a pattern, which produced few surprises. In the theatre there was the annual visit of the Carl Rosa Opera and the occasional ballet company. At the City Hall there were regular seasons of orchestral concerts by the Halle, The Liverpool and the Yorkshire Orchestras playing the standard repertoire. Interspersed between these regular orchestral concerts were visits by solo artists on the touring circuit, some of whom came a number of years running, others who gave one performance and were never seen again. The same people went to the same concerts and the size of the audience depended upon whether the artist appearing was a star personality – someone who had appeared in a Hollywood musical film or was a big name and sold a lot of records – which meant that for most of the routine orchestral concerts and more familiar artists there were often empty seats. Image rather than merit was the criteria by which the average music lover decided whether or not to spend his or her 3/6 (20p) on a seat at the City Hall. Oddly enough this in essence was the very thing the writer in the Musical Times complained about back in 1914, which seems also to have been a criticism made in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hey-ho! Not all the big names that toured the country came to Newcastle. Why some did and others preferred not to remains a mystery. The climate was certainly a factor when it came to opera singers from the sunnier climes. One of my greatest disappointments was when Tito Schipa, tenor, and master of Bel Canto, cancelled his 1950s visit for reasons of climate and the effect it might have on his voice. Poor bookings would have been another factor – by the 1950s Newcastle's image as a cultural town was considerably diminished. It relied entirely on the outside world for its music. It had no orchestra of its own and the irony of the situation was that the ratepayers of Newcastle were subsidising the Halle Orchestra from Manchester. A leaflet announcing the orchestra's forthcoming 1953-54 Season reads;

*'The concerts given last Season attracted large but not "capacity" audiences. However, the season as a whole cannot be regarded as unsatisfactory. And it is most gratifying to record that the Newcastle Corporation has recognised whereby the loss on the Season was kept within reasonable bounds. The Society is most grateful to the Corporation and hopes that that body will make its grant an annual one the better to ensure the continued visits of this world-famous Orchestra and its equally eminent Conductor'.*

The Halle's eminent conductor, apparently not content with being subsidised by the Newcastle City Council (and the Arts Council) used to harangue his captive

audience (who had already paid for their seat and bought a programme) from the rostrum asking them to give generously during the interval. This used to annoy me and I always felt that it lowered the tone of the Halle concerts considerably and detracted from John Barbirolli's otherwise excellent musicianship.

Some of the more unusual events of this period added to the variety of the concert seasons and probably the biggest name to make an appearance was the conductor, Leopold Stokowski, who made his Newcastle debut with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in an exciting programme of Brahms, Villa Lobos, Del Falla and Wagner. Unfortunately for reasons that Mr Stokowski obviously did not appreciate, 500 of the highest priced seats in the hall remained empty, and he left immediately after the concert without talking to anyone except to express the fervent hope that there would be a better house the following evening in Manchester. Five hundred (£500) was all the money Lynford-Joel Promotions had when they set themselves up in the Concert Booking Agency business in London at the end of the war. The name would mean little to Newcastle concert goers in the 1950s but L-J Promotions brought some of the best Italian opera singers to Newcastle for a number of years; Luigi Infantino, tenor, Paolo Silvieri, baritone and the enormously popular, Tito Gobbi. According to John Joel before a concert Gobbi would ask him to pick out the prettiest girl in the audience and let him know where she was sitting – he would then sing to her all evening. Gobbi would have been spoilt for choice at the City Hall in those days. On one of his tours Gobbi had a supporting pianist to fill in the gaps between his groups of songs, her name was Margaret McIntyre from Newcastle. Apparently she was a pianist of considerable technical ability but her unexciting personality excluded her from international acclaim. For the privilege of playing a few pieces on the same bill as Gobbi, she told Lynford-Joel Promotions that she was willing to underwrite any losses the tour may incur. Gobbi thought it a huge joke but was so confident of his success that he rightly predicted there would be no loss. A Russian entrepreneur, Eugene Iskoldoff, sharing John Joel's ideas about bringing Italian opera singers to the United Kingdom, brought quartets of opera singers from the Rome Opera House to the City Hall. Seeing the potential in this the impresario Gorlinsky also brought quartets of opera singers from La Scala Milan and San Carlo in Naples to the City Hall, but Iskoldoff upstaged him by presenting an Italian Opera Season at the Theatre Royal. The basic idea was sound and Newcastle benefited over a number of years from the experiment but the whole venture was a financial nightmare and troubles plagued these enterprises. It helped bring an end to Lynford-Joel's dreams of concert management, and the Italian opera venture was also to be Eugene Iskaldoff's last enterprise in England. He did not heed the warnings of those close to him and when the financial losses started coming in, rather than declare himself officially bankrupt, in the middle of a nervous breakdown, he committed suicide.

Apart from these all too-brief visits of genuine Italian Opera (and a series of Italian Opera films at the Grainger Cinema that featured some of the singers who appeared at the City Hall) Newcastle opera lovers had to be content with the

occasional visits of the Carl Rosa Opera Co. They had been doing a worthy job since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, touring opera productions around provincial towns, but it has to be said that by the 1950s their standard was very much second rate. Having said that during their 1952 Season at the Theatre Royal they treated the Newcastle opera lover to some of the most exciting singing the town had ever heard, when a young Maltese singer, Oreste Kirkop, appeared briefly with the company on his way up the operatic ladder. He was everything the stock company tenors were not: young, good looking, energetic, exciting and with a beautiful voice that rang out on the top notes. He was a passionate Cavaradossi in 'Tosca' and ably accompanied in the leading role by Victoria Sladen, but it was in Rigoletto that he was perfectly matched with one of the most beautiful coloratura voices of the time, the diminutive Gwen Catley. Oreste Kirkop, alas! chose the short cut to fame and ended up in Hollywood where he was for a brief period heralded as the successor to Mario Lanza, but he was soon to fade from the picture and into operatic oblivion. Two years earlier, in 1950, the British dancer, Anton Dolin, had appeared at the Theatre Royal in what was described as a Ballet Gala. The music danced to was Les Sylphides (Chopin), Le Beau Danube (Strauss) and the one act version of the Nutcracker Ballet by Tchaikovsky, which comprised mainly the music from the second act of the ballet. However the *tour de force* was Dolin's solo performance of Ravel's Bolero. The curtain parted to reveal a crouched figure bathed in a spotlight on a stage in total darkness and perfect silence. The music, almost imperceptible at first, began with the tap tap of the drum and in the course of the next twelve minutes or so both dancer and orchestra rose to a nerve tingling climax before collapsing in a discordant heap to the deafening sound of applause. Dolin deserved all 'Sixes' for his performance, but that was reserved for Torvell and Dean, who many years later performed the same dramatic scenario on ice to even greater effect.

From this brief account of some of the highlights of the early 1950s concert and theatre scene it would be easy to assume that the town was well catered for when it came to live music and yet, to have lived through this period was to find it rather dull and easily conclude that Newcastle was a bit of a cultural desert. This was largely due to the feeling that, on the one hand, little emphasis was being given locally to raising cultural standards and, on the other, that a disproportionate emphasis appeared to be placed, by the town, on other activities and pursuits that served only to bring it into disrepute. There seemed to be total disregard for anything of a cultural nature and life was spent in the pursuit of enjoyment. The occasional classical event at the City Hall served only to raise expectations and increase dissatisfaction at one and the same time. It raised the same old question time and time again - Why should Newcastle have to rely on outsiders for its regular doses of musical culture and what prevented it from having an orchestra of its own? There was the feeling that Newcastle had no musical history of its own, yet half a century earlier, the town could have considered itself musically to be on almost equal terms with other larger provincial towns, before a combination of circumstances hastened its

deterioration into a musical backwater. What went wrong is an interesting question and one worth looking into. It is possible to fully enjoy and feel proud of the rich musical culture of the North East today without knowing anything about yesterday but a knowledge of the one enriches our understanding and appreciation of the other.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

### PAST REGRETS – FUTURE HOPES

The history of music in the English provinces followed much the same pattern in the bigger industrial towns, including Newcastle, although it was one of the smaller ones. By the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century these towns were responding to an ever widening public interest in music. Modern symphony orchestras of professional standing were coming into existence, concert halls were being built for them to perform in and music schools were being established to train future musicians to a high standard. Each town developed at its own pace but along similar lines. There were, however, individual factors that gave some towns the advantage over others. Playing an important part in this was the town's geographical location and its accessibility. The town's responsiveness to cultural change, determined by the origin and cultural backgrounds of those who flocked to these towns in their period of rapid growth. There was also the towns desire to create a cultural environment and, of course, the willingness of rich benefactors to support it. Up until the latter part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Newcastle's musical culture seems to have survived without municipal help but its independence was founded on shaky foundations. Notwithstanding this it seemed as though the town had within its grip many of the essential requirement to become music capital of the North East. Unfortunately this was not to be the case and it went the other way. The musical life of the town, like the Castle Keep and the City Walls, was allowed to gradually erode and crumble away over the course of the next fifty years.

What Newcastle lacked, in musical terms, was a personality or personalities forceful enough to argue the case for music as part of a wider campaign aimed at raising cultural standards within the town. For example, Birmingham had a number of strong minded individuals, the most notable of whom was Granville Bantock, composer, versatile musician and Head of the Birmingham School of Music. Manchester was fortunate in having Charles Halle and Bournemouth (the exception) got more than it bargained for with Dan Godfrey, who not only single-handedly created a musical culture in this sleepy sea-side town but helped put it on the map by giving life to symphony orchestra still playing today. It is, however, only fair to add that all of these people had sympathetic allies within the town council, which made their tasks easier. That is not to say they did not have to fight to get what they wanted but their perseverance paid off. In Newcastle, I assume, both William Rea and Edgar Bainton had similar intentions of introducing and developing some form of musical culture within the town. William Rea in particular probably shared Dan Godfrey's visions that he might instil into the inhabitants of Newcastle the love of good music, and like Godfrey he must have been conscious of the fact that unlike the Continent, in England there was not the same strong support for the arts at municipal level and that he had his

work cut out convincing the local council of the need for this. Godfrey, however, was better placed to achieve this as he had been appointed Musical Director, whereas Rea's appointment was as Council Organist. From all reports William Rea was a man of impeccable character and I am sure that Dan Godfrey was too but he was not above a bit of cunning when it came to getting what he wanted. He composed a waltz and dedicated it to the mayor's wife. All is fair in love and music!

Edgar Bainton, as Principle of the Newcastle Conservatoire and conductor of the Newcastle Philharmonic Orchestra, was in the best position to argue the case for music with the Newcastle Council but I can find no evidence to show that any form of dialogue along these lines took place. Bainton must have contemplated the idea as he allegedly stated it would cost no more than a penny per person on the rate to support a town orchestra. William Rea, who had studied and lived in Germany, as well as in London before coming to Newcastle, made more efforts than anyone to make music part of everyday life in Newcastle but he stopped short of taking on the town council, his employers, over this matter. He may have been successful in getting the People's Concerts started but the council probably viewed these as a social necessity, in the same way as music in the parks, rather than a move toward establishing a musical culture. But in any case they nipped in the bud any ambitions Rea may have had in this direction when they retained control of the concerts and informed him that he could run the concerts but would remain Council Organist. Whittaker was an outstanding musician but he like his musician colleagues was at heart a music teacher and did not have the entrepreneurial spirit necessary to sway the town council. Within the musical establishment generally there appears to have been a lack of managerial direction and a shortage of organisational skills, which, I suspect, was one of the primary factors in the ultimate demise of the Conservatoire and the Philharmonic Orchestra.

Comparing Newcastle with the more favourably placed towns is in some respects comparing apples with pears. Fate dealt Newcastle a blow when it placed it in the North East corner of England. Largely because of its isolated position it has always retained a strong regional identity, which together with its damp, cold climate did not do it any favours musically, except of the local variety. It never proved a magnet for musicians from the south of the country or from abroad. as was the case with Birmingham, Manchester, Liverpool and Bournemouth. This unfortunately was to the town's detriment. Henschel wanted to settle in Newcastle but I think it was less to do with music and more to do with the fact that he had lived in the area for a short while as a young soldier and liked it. William Rea, a very talented and classically trained musician, who had made an early impression on a number of important musical figures in London and Germany, came as Town Council Organist (who knows why?) and made an outstanding contribution to music in his time. but one cannot help but feel he was capable of much more. Edgar Bainton a brilliant musician was invited to join the Conservatoire and there is the feeling here that his first allegiance was to the

Conservatoire, composing and music in general – he was a pedagogue and probably did not want to get involved in musical politics. Rea and Bainton. were both, technically speaking, outsiders, who were not committed to the town other than through their respective appointments but more surprising is the case of William Gillies Whittaker. He was a Tynesider and one of its key musical figures with a lot to offer but he deserted the town for a musical appointment in Glasgow. All of these musicians were essential to the musical life of the town and their departure (William Rea in fact retired and died soon after) created a vacuum which was never filled.

Charles Avison did not have to worry about competition from visiting orchestras and their effect on local musicians, but one hundred years later the town was playing host to a number of visiting symphony orchestras. Newcastle welcomed these touring musicians but in doing so was it making a mistake. In Birmingham for instance during its orchestra's formative years the professional musicians in the town objected strongly to outsiders being invited in on the basis that it weakened their argument that what the town needed was a permanent orchestra. There was also the threat to their livelihood to be considered. There were literally hundreds of musicians in Newcastle at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century but of what standard we do not really know. There would have been a core of professionals, but the majority would have been amateurs. Newcastle had never had an influx of Continental musicians, as was the case in Manchester, Liverpool and Leeds for instance and even Dan Godfrey started with an Italian band in Bournemouth. These Continentals brought their culture and high playing standards with them and stood up for their profession but in Newcastle the amateur tradition in music thrived and whilst amateurism had always been part of English tradition it did not help build first rate professional orchestras. Judging only by the names of orchestral players printed in historic programmes for concerts in Newcastle by local musicians I would say that the vast majority of them were of English origin and more than likely, locals. From this I can only draw the conclusion that the general standard of playing was probably not very high. Quality orchestral musicians could have been invited into the town to boost the standard of a local orchestra, as they had been on festival occasions, but the town would have had to show some commitment which never appears to have been the case. Nor does there seem to have been any compulsion on the part of Newcastle musicians to establish some sort of artistic integrity and authority within the town.

It is one of life's ironies to discover that Newcastle had at the turn of the century within its midst a 'Dan Godfrey' of its own. His name was H.G.Amers (see also chapter eleven). Amers and Godfrey were so alike as to be able to draw direct comparisons. They both came from well known musical families, they were both disciplined musicians in the Military Band style and they were both capable of taking a band of half decent musicians and moulding them into a fine orchestral band. They both made their names at English Spa Resorts building up a local musical culture that became a magnet for all the leading musicians in the

country. Amers died in 1936 and Godfrey in 1939. Amers had a first class musical background and a distinguished military career. It was natural in his youth that he should be attracted to the military style of bandsmanship as this kind of music was the Englishman's staple diet; the average Englishman had not yet become accustomed to the modern symphony orchestra and the cacophonous modern music it played. Amers first took himself to Scarborough in 1909 and after a season there, moved to Brighton. He conducted in Newcastle often enough but his contribution to the town's musical culture was superficial. He returned to Brighton after the war but soon moved to Eastbourne where he remained for the rest of his career and created a series of music festivals that ran from 1923 –1939. In the same way as his rival in Bournemouth he created a centre of English music and attracted amongst others, Edward Elgar, Ethel Smyth, Gustav Holst, Granville Bantock, Roger Quilter, Balfour Gardiner, Percy Grainger, John Ireland, Vaughan-Williams and even the famous Russian composer, Alexander Glazounov. He spread his net even further and recruited the assistance of Hamilton Harty, Thomas Beecham, Malcolm Sargent, John Barbirolli and Albert Coates to conduct his concerts. He slowly educated his audiences by slipping in odd movements from symphonies between popular items until by the 1930s they were getting full-blown symphonic programmes. His death coincided with the end of an era in Eastbourne and the kind of music he had presented, and by 1939 music hating councillors were proposing to pull down the Winter Garden and build something useful like a country club, which everyone could enjoy!

Why could Amers not have done this sort of thing in Whitley Bay. The simple answer is that Whitley Bay catered only for the locals and Scots factory workers and the Spanish City provided all their needs. At about this time there was a thriving musical culture in many of the leading spas around the country but none of the wealthier set came to the North East for the good of their health. To create a musical culture, in addition to commitment there is a need for an audience educated to listen to good music. Given the right opportunities Newcastle might have created such an audience but as we have seen from the Laing Art Gallery, the haggling over funds for the People's Concerts and apparent lack of interest in having a purpose built concert hall for musical performances, the Council was not interested in Art or Culture in any form. It was not even interested in local musicians or music per se for that matter unless it served some subsidiary purpose. For example when a decision had to be made regarding music at the 1929 North East Coast Exhibition, an event intended amongst other things to show off the regions achievements and boost local moral it turned to Capt Amers and his South East Coast musicians. A slap in the face for Newcastle professional musicians – or had the state of music making locally deteriorated that much by 1929. Perhaps not, but the signs were imminent and by the 1950s it had reached its lowest ebb. This generally coincided with a period of hardship and change on Tyneside. The city was perceived by many people as being a grey town and a cultural desert. The majority preferred to spend their hard-earned cash on the cinema, beer and football and as a consequence Newcastle

and the North East was viewed from outside as 'Andy Capp' country. The truth of the matter was that Newcastle was not an uncultured city but a city deprived of Culture through apathy and ignorance. However, that was about to change. A regional ferment to improve the quality of life was beginning to take place and an essential part of this was the need to give the town a cultural facelift.

The instigator of change was not a leading personality in the music world with plenty of clout but a young music student in Newcastle University who, for no other reason than he fancied some conducting experience, decided that the only way he was likely to get it was by forming his own band. His timing was perfect although he, himself, could not have been aware of it then. But his action was about to give birth to the Region's biggest artistic success and his creation, the Northern Sinfonia, would ultimately prove to be the biggest single influence in Regional Music. However, we should not overlook the fact that the Sinfonia did not change everything overnight, it was a gradual process. Nor was the Sinfonia prepared to concede its total commitment to Tyneside even fourteen year after it was founded in Newcastle if its General Manager's remarks to me were anything to go by. During a conversation with Keith Statham, just before a concert in Germany in the early 1970s I told him how proud I was of the orchestra and all that talent from Tyneside. He looked at me aghast and replied, "Good God! none of them actually come from Newcastle" Whether that is true today hardly matters as the Sinfonia, itself, is now as much a part of the North Eastern as Bessie Surtees, Blaydon Races and the Millennium Bridge..

The world has moved on and Newcastle Gateshead is making a bid for European Capital of Culture 2008. A recent glossy leaflet I received was proud to acknowledge its 2,000 year history making specific reference to its past and present engineering achievements but not its past cultural history. The bid for Capital of Culture is based on the region's vision for the future but the operative word is Culture. I believe it is now time that Newcastle acknowledged its long buried musical background. Its Cultural achievements in the past may not have changed the world but its Cultural plans for the future aim to. As the leaflet said 'A European Culture staged here will be regarded as the best ever.' I am looking forward to the future.

## Author's Note

Since completing the main part of this book it has become known that Newcastle lost the bid in the runner-up title of European Capital of Culture, 2008 and Liverpool was chosen. The decision was made by a panel of eleven independent judges chaired by Sir Jeremy Isaacs, former director of the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, London. Their decision revealed that Liverpool was already brimming with culture and was at the leading edge of the visual arts. It housed the largest collection of modern art outside the capital and it promised a strong musical programme, which was to include opera and ballet. But a most potent factor in the judge's decision was that the whole city had involved itself in the cultural programme.

Following the decision of the Culture Secretary, Tessa Jowett, said that every one of the six short listed cities would have been a worthy nomination for the title, but I would go further and say there can be little doubt that of the five semi-finalists Newcastle was the strongest and would have been equally worthy of the award. Having said that, I think it would be foolish to ignore the concealed message in the panel's findings and that was to establish a cultural ethos within a city calls for the shared participation interests and enthusiasm of the people and the city authorities.

Newcastle in my opinion, is a city also brimming with culture and all the more fascinating for the fact that it has taken centuries of pioneering effort to reach its current unprecedented cultural status. Newcastle may not have won the bid, for whatever cultural or political reasons, but in the attempt it changed the face of the city presenting a new image to the outside world. Musically speaking it is the cultural capital of the northeast and the spirit of Charles Avison lives on. In the circumstances I can only see things getting better and better and see no reason to backtrack on the sentiments I expressed over a year ago.

JWP July 2003

## Acknowledgements

This book would not have been possible but for the untiring patience and unstinting good natured assistance of the staff of the Local Studies Section of Newcastle Central Library and the Tyne and Wear Archives, Blandford House, Newcastle. Piecing together the town's musical history was made doubly difficult by the fact that it has been ignored for so long the general thread of the story was lost ages ago. Retrieving and assembling the facts needed to compile anything like a presentable chronological sequence of historical events proved very difficult in that they are mostly fragmentary and littered about all over the place and often catalogued under some other subject. All the relevant information held by the two archive sources mentioned above, which is a great deal, but by no

means all if the aim were a definitive work on the regions musical history, has not been catalogued and it was in this respect that the staffs of the archives were of invaluable assistance often making helpful suggestions off their own bat or painstakingly searching somewhere out of sight and then producing from 'goodness knows where' valuable documentary material, with a smile and a cheerful comment . I am also obliged to Kay Eason, Chief Librarian of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle for her interest in my project and in making available for my perusal copies of Burney's 'History of Music' (1789), Avison's 'Essay on Musical Expression' and William Hayes' 'Remarks on Mr Avisons Essay' (1753), as well as Browning's 'Parleying with Certain People' (1889). To others who took the trouble to reply to my letters or were kind enough to e-mail replies or return my telephone calls, including Kieran Fitzsimons, Director of The Fitzsimons Choir, Gordon Dixon of the Avison Society and Ian Ayris, who was kind enough to enlighten me on historic plaques in the city and give me leads in other directions, I am most grateful.

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Also consulted were various Newcastle newspapers, and collections of newspaper cuttings of musical interest covering the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, Extensive collections of concert and theatre programmes from 18<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, The Musical Times, Journal of the British Music Society, Gentlemen's Magazine and original minutes and published records of Newcastle Council Meetings.

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