"THE TRIAL OF MIDAS THE SECOND."

AN ACCOUNT OF BURNEY'S UNPUBLISHED SATIRE ON HAWKINS'S "HISTORY OF MUSIC" IN THE JOHN RYLANDS LIBRARY.

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THAT keen judge, Mrs. Virginia Woolf, has written of Dr. Burney: "It is perhaps his diffuseness that makes him a trifle nebulous. He seems to be for ever writing, and then rewriting and requiring his daughters to write for him, endless books and articles . . . until he seems to melt away at last in a cloud of words." With prose as his medium, Burney certainly belonged to "the mob of gentlemen who wrote with ease." The urbane flow of his musical History carries us over many pages of forgotten names and outworn opinions. But he wrote verse, too, as anyone knows who has looked into Madame D'Arblay's Memoirs of her father; and in verse, if he "wrote with ease," it was the kind which often makes reading difficult. Tame, conventional effusions of the mood and the moment, or official rhymes drawn from him in his character of musical pundit, like his quite tolerable welcome of Haydn to England in 1794—such things have hitherto been accounted his title-deeds as versifier. But a small note-book in this Library contains a work of greater interest, quite the most important piece of verse-writing yet known to have come from his pen. It belongs to the collection of manuscript material once owned by Mrs. Thrale's adopted son, Sir John Piozzi Salusbury.

The little book ¹ is seven inches tall by four and a half wide.


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Of its seventy-four pages, forty are taken up with a manuscript satire in heroic couplets entitled:

**THE TRIAL of MIDAS the 2d.**

or

Congress of Musicians.

Sixteen other pages contain corrections of the text, additions, or footnotes. All the handwriting is Burney's. Under a transparent disguise the poem satirises *A General History of the Science and Practice of Music*, written by Sir John Hawkins. The footnotes, indeed, consist entirely of quotations from that work. Beneath the last line of text appears the significant date 1777—the year after the publication of Hawkins's *History* and also of the first volume of Burney's. No author's name or initials are appended; yet, on internal evidence alone, the satire cannot conceivably be the work of anyone but Burney himself.

By a coincidence not without parallel in the annals of other departments of learning, the first two comprehensive musical histories in our language saw the light in the same year. In publication, indeed, Burney anticipated his rival by four months. He had issued plans as early as 1770. No leisured amateur, however, like Hawkins, but a busy musician and a fashionable teacher, he did not finish his fourth and last volume until 1789, the year of Hawkins's death. Widely praised and liberally subscribed for, his work seemed to extinguish that of his rival. But only his first volume ever reached a second edition. Hawkins's *History*, a much-maligned production, whose appearance, complete in five volumes, so perturbed Burney in 1776, reached its second edition in 1853, and its third in 1875, all but a century after its first publication. Already, from such facts, we suspect something of the differences in predilection and temper which divided the two men, friends of Johnson though they both were, and members of the Literary Club. But, to account for the satire, we must examine these differences more closely. Burney,

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1 For this assertion I have the palæographic authority of my colleague Dr. M. Tyson. In his charge (in Eng. MS. 545) there are 13 letters, besides pieces of fugitive verse, all addressed to Mrs. Thrale by Burney between 1777 and 1807.
after all, though not the most gifted, was perhaps the friendliest, the most urbane and tactful member of Johnson’s circle. Johnson called him “a man for all the world to love.” How could he, then, even as a private, unpublished indulgence, satirise a fellow-musician as bitterly as in some of these pages he does? For to be Midas, King of Phrygia, is to be no musician at all; Apollo decorated Midas with a pair of ass’s ears for liking the rustic reed of Pan better than the lyre.

Beneath Charles Burney’s many virtues, beneath his wide culture and prodigious industry, lay one chief failing: he was fashionable. We do not think mainly of the aristocratic pupils among whom he spent his days; of the foreigners, sometimes distinguished, who crowded his musical evenings; or of his daughter Fanny’s appointment at Court. He was fashionable as a historian of music; he upheld fashionable views. And he did so without compromise, for his urbanity masked a strong, rather obtuse positiveness. Johnson knew that; contradicted by Johnson, Burney had once fired up and made him apologise, an event unique in Mrs. Thrale’s experience.\(^1\) Continental travel confirmed in Burney’s mind the conviction that the prevailing Italian school of music was the supreme flower of the art. For him, Handel was great mainly because of his Italian operas, written and produced in London from 1711 to 1740. Only a handful of songs from them survive to-day; but to that “limbo of vanity” raised by Handel and others in London, to its strings of florid airs, its petted male sopranis and prime donne, Burney devoted over three hundred pages of his History. To Handel’s oratorios he gave the space of a bare list, and little more. Their choruses, the composer’s chief strength, were for Burney survivals of a bygone art. He felt at home with single melodies, however ornate; for they were fashionable. Choral polyphony, the weaving of simultaneous melodies, was to him “Gothic” and outworn. He did fair justice to Purcell, though unable to hide his regret that this composer lived in the dark ages before the eighteenth century. He slighted unpardonably our Elizabethan madrigalists. Worst of all, he vouchsafed to John Sebastian

Bach a few scrappy sentences; in those days the greatest of polyphonists was decidedly unfashionable. Such are the main blots on this famous and still valuable History. Their origin seems clear. The fashionable Burney is less "nebulous" than Mrs. Woolf imagines.

A dictum of Johnson hangs round Hawkins's neck: "Sir John was a most unclubbable man." In that age the brightest spirits were usually clubbable; so much the worse for any who were not. We have little unbiassed testimony about Hawkins. Johnson also called him penurious and mean, and spoke of his "tendency to savageness"; on the credit side is the assurance: "I believe him to be an honest man at the bottom." Hawkins made good as an attorney; he was knighted for his zeal as a magistrate. His wife brought him one fortune and inherited another. In leisured ease he wrote a history of the art he had always loved, not with his rival's busy professional devotion, but with the dogged fondness of the enlightened amateur who has strong antiquarian instincts. He did not travel, but luckily acquired valuable texts and authorities from the dispersed musical library of Dr. Pepusch. His History displays nothing like Burney's technical knowledge, and few graces of style; it is less clearly planned, more conservative in taste, and in its theoretical parts more crabbed and prolix. But its narrative deals out a more even-handed justice. Hawkins respected Elizabethan music, sacred and secular; his treatment of its composers, even when inadequate, was never scornful. He found room for a decent account of Lully, the French operatic master whom his rival disdained. His pages on Handel, though in detail less rich than Burney's, were much more sensibly proportioned; he said more coherently the little he had to say of Bach, and even quoted from his work. Indeed, both in mass and in quality, his musical examples put those of Burney in the shade. And there breathes from his pages a fine sense of the multifariousness of music. He follows the art into strange byways and corners; we realise more fully than in Burney its social, its antiquarian aspects.

I say nothing of the inaccuracies of statement which abound both in Burney's and in Hawkins's work, especially in the earlier volumes. These Histories are the foundations, still firm in parts, of a modern scholarship which has transcended them.
There is something like charm (Dr. Ernest Walker has felt it) in the description by Hawkins of the humble beginnings of the Madrigal Society. Here, with old music, and among men, of whatever station, who loved it, Hawkins might possibly have been “clubbable” after all. Fashionable he never was. He roundly condemned that curse of his age, empty virtuosity in singing or in playing; contemporary opera, he declared, was to the judicious “the mere offspring of luxury... of all entertainments the most unnatural and absurd.”

Little wonder that Burney wrote his satire. Here, in 1776, four months after his own first volume, there came at a blow these five tomes of Hawkins, praising what he despised, attacking his most cherished predilections. In the name of Italian art, if only in private, he must lash this Goth, this dusty antiquarian of music:

Black-Letter’d Chains his cold Ideas bind
Nor let Conviction beam upon his Mind;
Eager with fire & Faggot to pursue
Whate’er is graceful, Elegant, or new.  

The poem would have chimed in, had he printed it, with much public execration; with a bitter attack on Hawkins’s work by George Steevens in St. James’s Chronicle; and with a catch, widely sung for years afterwards, whose doggerel lines are quoted by Sir Henry Hadow in “Grove.” Burney’s satire tells of the

2 Compare Johnson’s definition, in his Life of Hughes: “The Italian opera, an exotick and irrational entertainment.”
3 The Trial of Midas the Second, p. 5.

"Have you Sir John Hawkins’ History?
Some folks think it quite a mystery.
Musick fill’d his wondrous brain.
How d’ye like him? is it plain?
Both I’ve read and must agree
That Burney’s History pleases me."

Which in performance is made to sound:

"Sir John Hawkins!
Burn his history!
How d’ye like him?
Burn his history!
Burney’s history pleases me."
arrangement, trial and sentence of his rival, the second Midas, who has shown his musical ineptitude by disagreeing with the fashionable school. Of course—the author assumes at the outset, with an amusing air of infallibility—right judgment in such matters is really an affair of inspiration:

Within the magic circle of the Arts,  
Where Genius only draws & knows the Charts,  
What Mortal, uninspir'd, who entrance found,  
The Rocks cd clamber, or the Caverns sound?

Burney, however, knows his way about the realm, and will now recount for us "the ills that wait on Gothic rage."

A satiric versifier of his type, tolerably well read, especially in Pope, sometimes leaves us doubtful whether he means all he says. Eighteenth-century satire could be fairly malignant. In charity we may assume that in parts of the poem—mainly in those not dealing directly with Hawkins's History—Burney piles up defamation not from actual malice, but because such is the satirist's accepted task. He sneers at his victim's magisterial calling; he dwells with satisfaction on his unpopularity. With such passages we need not concern ourselves. We shall seek out those, germane to his subject, in which the writer becomes most articulate; where his indignation and scorn—not always unjustified—so work on his diction as to turn it from conventional paths. Apollo is besieged on his throne by a clamorous crowd. They complain of Hawkins, "a certain scribe malign," who has set up, wholly unqualified, as a writer on music, and has traduced their favourite composers. In their arraignment of him, a fixed notion of the writer's prevails, already expressed in our first quotation from the poem—that a reigning fashion in music is of necessity right, while older forms of the art are perforce barbarous and outworn:

For he, alas! long since so stuff'd his head  
"With all such reading as was never read":¹  
With Canons, Madrigals, Motets, & Fugues,  
With Points, Conundrums, & such useless drugs;  
So oft in Cobwebs poked his Nose & Broom,  
For Good, in house or head he left no room.

¹ Pope, The Dunciad, IV, 248.
Hence, ev'ry Rule he draws from Gothic Works,
From barb'rous Jargon, & unmeaning Quirks,
Produc'd in impious & ill-fated Days
When all thy Sacred altars ceas'd to blaze . . .

Helped out by a line from The Dunciad, this passage is livelier in imagery than the bulk of Burney's poem; conviction breathes from it, too; here he undoubtedly means what he says. Apollo is indignant, but thinks the fate of such a Midas too paltry a concern for a god. "Try him yourselves," he says, and vanishes.

In the next Canto, accordingly, the court sits; in London, we imagine, but the scene is not localised. The elected judge is Dr. William Boyce, a respected veteran composer at the date of the poem; editor of a fine collection of Cathedral music, writer of solid anthems and of the sturdy song "Heart of Oak." Burney thus describes him:

A man whose Probity was bias proof,
And Music, like his Manners, bold & rough.
In both, tho' new refinements he withstood,
His heart & Harmony were sound & Good.

That any music by Boyce should be accounted "rough" is sad proof of the Italianate taste of the satirist.

The trial begins; Midas is accused of defaming certain composers. The list of them is swelled by one of the witnesses, not the brazen classical figure of Fame, we are told, but a more modest lady called Fair Renown, who bursts into tears as she recounts the fate of her sons. To-day the list reads strangely; half these names sleep undisturbed in "Grove"; rarely indeed do we hear a note of the music of those who bore them. And the names are of course mostly Italian, or belonging to the Italian schools. In certain complaints, too, Burney is justified; Hawkins passes much too cursorily over the important Scarlattis, father and son. On Palestrina he is fairly adequate, but dry; he never commanded, even for his favourites, Burney's measure of urbane eloquence. He had also a surly habit of withholding praise from composers who had received much of it. Allegri, for example, wrote a famous Miserere, "which," says Hawkins, "by reason of its supposed excellence and pre-eminence over all others of the like kind, has for a series of years been not only
reserved for the most solemn functions, but kept in the library of the pontifical chapel with a degree of care and reserve that none can account for.” This was the kind of thing to infuriate Burney, who revered established reputations; above all, when Hawkins challenged Allegri with Purcell and Blow, and crushed him with Tallis—all mere Englishmen! Hasse, too, though German-born, was for many years of the eighteenth century the chief pillar of Italian opera, turning out by the bushel in Dresden just the airs that suited the *primo uomo*, the *prima donna*, and their infatuated train. His music is forgotten. Hawkins spoke moderately when he said that Hasse’s abilities were “greatly overrated,” and agreed with another critic as to his “effeminacy.” This was to fly in the face of contemporary opinion. Of course, Hawkins made mistakes; but Time, on the whole, has vindicated his strictures on the sons of Fair Renown.

The witnesses at the trial are all personified abstractions, which the author tries hard to bring to life. Science, a worn, grey old woman with a piercing eye, declares that Hawkins has no real knowledge of her rules. She speaks of his “Gothic authors,” of his endless “dry quotations”—Hawkins certainly overdoes these—and of his exasperating lack of order and method:

> For so much Darkness & Confusion reign  
> That all cry out—Chaos is come again.

Taste orates in true eighteenth-century style about his own mission; it is to “lop luxuriance” from the artist’s “lavish soul.” But what can he do? Hawkins disclaims him, does not know him. Wit, a much laboured figure with a tolerable touch here and there, says that the solemn looks of the prisoner have always chilled his blood. And a modicum of wit, could he but find it, would undoubtedly help the reader through Hawkins’s volumes. In the last of the three Cantos appear two witnesses for the defence. One, a psalmodist, deposes to the prisoner’s deep lore in church music; the other, a dusty, cobwebbed figure, speaks of his antiquarian learning in general. Burney’s impatience with the latter subject, much though he had to delve into it for his own *History*, is evident in some of his letters, and in his preface too. It breathes from this witness’s account of Hawkins’s “Gothicism”: 
Then for inveterate Diligence, my Friend
With Hearne or great Duns Scotus may contend:
O'er Hedge & Ditch, thro' half the Realm he'd flounder
To learn when Death snatch'd from us a Bell-founder;
Nay, Mine a Cemetry ten Fathom deep
To find when poor Flute-borers went to sleep;
The many Peals of Bells a Rudhall cast
Or Flutes a Stanesby burrow'd for the blast . . .

Burney's very aversion from such points gives vividness to his writing here. With his eyes on the polite contemporary world of music, with his ears bewitched by Italian opera, he may have cared little for the fact that the Rudhalls were a notable clan of Gloucester bell-founders, or that two Thomas Stanesbys, father and son, "men of ingenuity and exquisite workmen" (but too obscure for "Grove"), made flutes in London in the eighteenth century. But fashions change in music, and facts abide. Much of Burney is now just a monument to bad taste; the patient, multifarious instinct of Hawkins for facts has given longer life and more permanent value to his History.

Boyce, the judge, now sums up; he tries to be fair, and reminds the court that the prisoner has at least praised Handel and Purcell. But the verdict, of course, is "Guilty." We quote certain lines giving the purport of the prisoner's speech from the dock. They present Hawkins in a guise grotesque enough, but showing effectively the impression he made on contemporaries of a muddled amateur, a dry, defiant conservative of music:

No Words He'll use, or Music, to his death
But what delighted great Elizabeth.
His Style is uniformly free from swelling
And such as best comports with Story-telling . . .
Some Critics say, with taunting Insults bitter
That both his Head & Work are in a Litter . . .
But, 'tis a World incurably diseas'd
That, by his Rules, will ne'er be taught, or pleas'd.
So, let 'em perish! He'll no more admonish
Or try again the Learned to astonish.
No new Impressions of his Volumes Five
Shall ere be seen by Mortals now alive;
Boyce passes sentence. Hawkins (in effigy) and his five volumes (in reality) are to be drowned in Fleet Ditch. This is done, and the satire ends.

Our summary has, we hope, made clear the drift of *The Trial of Midas the Second*. In our citations we have tried to show the author's writing at its best, and his views in their most forgivable light. His style is on its average levels duller and lamer, more full of the trite poetic abstractions of the Popian school. And, as we have said, he descends in places to more malignant personalities, even to branding Hawkins as a Midas in the commoner sense of that term. If it is fair to take such things, at least in part, as the stock-in-trade of the satirist, it is also charitable to assume that Burney thought his whole poem, both in matter and in manner, unworthy of publication. We may have seemed unfair to him, in our concern to do justice to his rival's solid worth. But to right the balance should not be difficult. Hawkins, greatly to his credit, loved the Elizabethans and the earlier polyphonists, whose abiding qualities had been obscured by the vogue of flimsy Italian opera. But at Handel, and at the worthier Italian instrumental writers such as Corelli and Geminiani, his musical mind appeared to stop. He lived till 1789, yet could not appreciate Haydn. Burney did; he might follow fashions, but he took the good with the bad. Seven years younger than Hawkins, and much longer lived, he realised the worth not only of Haydn and Mozart but of early Beethoven before he died. For an English musician verging on eighty to appreciate Beethoven in 1805 was no bad achievement. Let us quote, as a relief from Burney's verse, a delightful passage from one of his memoir-books of that year, copied later by Madame D'Arblay into her own *Memoirs* of her father. He was a guest one evening at the Duke of Portland's, where he met Lord and Lady Darnley.

1 A bad prophecy; Hawkins, as we have said, was twice reprinted. But Burney's wish was father to the thought.
But they had been announced while he was dressing, and he did not know who they were:

"... I got into a hot dispute that I should else, at the Duke's house, have certainly avoided. The expression, 'modern refinements,' happened to escape me, which both my lord and his lady, with a tone of consummate contempt, repeated: 'Modern refinements, indeed!' 'Well, then,' cried I, 'let us call them modern changes of style and taste.'... They were quite irri-
tated at this; and we all three then went to it ding-dong! I made use of the same arguments that I have so often used in my musical writings—that ingenious men cannot have been idle during a century; and the language of sound is never stationary, any more than that of conversation and books. ... And to say that the symphonies of Haydn, and the compositions of Mozart and Beethoven, have no merit, because they are not like Handel, Corelli and Geminiani... is supposing time to stand still.—I was going on, when the kind Duke, struck, I doubt not, by a view of the storm I was incautiously brewing, contrived to whisper in my ear, 'You are upon tender ground, Dr. Burney!' I drew back, with as troublesome a fit of coughing as I could call to my aid; and during its mock operation, his Grace had the urbanity to call up a new subject."

Yes: he is still the fashionable Burney, in the paltrier as well as the worthier sense. To stand up to a Johnson may be all in the day's, or the night's, work; but to stand up to a Lord and a Lady Darnley on a matter of music, even when you are the leading English authority with the prestige of a famous History behind you—that is a thing to regret, if by mistake you happen to do it. But again, let us be charitable; Burney was usually quite an amiable man; no doubt he realised that "hot disputes" on any subject should be avoided. And Hawkins, often enough, was a surly person; the testimony on that point cannot all be wrong. We may feel disconcerted that "a man for all the world to love" wrote The Trial of Midas the Second. But Hawkins's History had touched him to the quick; he unloaded the venom from his mind by means of his satire, and then, we hope, forgot all about it. He may—we cannot tell—have shown this little note-book to friends. Yet, through one fact, his character as an amiable man may stand secure: he did not publish his Midas.