# Introduction: 'A period of orchestral starvation'? Perceptions of London concert life, 1795–1813

This study has grown almost inexorably out of two earlier projects on the social history of music in Britain. The first of these – an undergraduate dissertation on the reception of Beethoven's symphonies in this country – resulted in a detailed examination of the documented responses to these works as performed during the early concert series given by the Philharmonic Society from 1813. Having noted the relatively sophisticated reactions to these performances on the part of the London audiences, a Masters thesis considered certain aspects of the context for this reception, focusing on the interaction between the development of public concert culture and networks of private musical consumption. Subsequent doctoral research was intended to provide a still further contextualization of the early activity at the Philharmonic, exploring critical reactions to the performance of symphonic repertory in London during the years immediately prior to 1813.

My attempts to create a hypothetical 'horizon of expectations' for the first audiences at the Philharmonic – and thus to read their reactions to Beethoven in light of their earlier musical experiences – soon revealed the need for some preparatory groundwork. Indeed, with the years leading up to the founding of the Philharmonic having been widely dismissed as something of a 'dark age' in the history of public performance in this country, I found there was still much to be done, both in identifying the dominant organizational structures within the concert culture of the period and in establishing the patterns of repertory selection and programme construction utilized therein. In beginning to address some of these issues, my project inevitably became less aesthetically grounded than it might otherwise have been, but its objectives remained unchanged.[1] Now presented in a slightly expanded form, it provides a wide-ranging exploration of the context for the founding of the Philharmonic Society, offering a detailed examination of the performance of symphonic repertory within certain previously under-explored strands of London concert culture during the period 1795–1813 (which will be referred to hereafter as the turn of the century).

The study begins by considering how and why such negative impressions of the years before 1813 may have originally emerged. Chapter 1

provides a summary of two more established milestones in the history of English orchestral performance, tracing the events surrounding Haydn's London residency of 1791 to 1795 and outlining the steps leading to the founding of the Philharmonic Society in 1813. In discussing the early documentation of the latter, this suggests that the roots of what will hereafter be referred to as the Philharmonic 'myth' – the notion that London experienced a period of orchestral inactivity between 1795 and 1813 – may be found in the writings of the Society's founders and early historians.

Chapter 2 proceeds from the notion, addressed briefly in Chapter 1, that the positive impact of Haydn's residency on both the popularity and the aesthetic validity of the symphony makes the supposed demise of orchestral performance in the years after his departure decidedly problematic. It suggests that certain shifts in the socio-political, cultural and economic climate in London during the final quarter of the eighteenth century led to a number of changes in the organizational structure of musical activity after 1795, noting that the impact of these changes on the nature and extent of concert documentation may have played a significant part in the continued dominance of the Philharmonic 'myth'. Having identified such modifications, the remaining chapters adopt a range of previously unexplored methodologies in order to elicit a more sympathetic reading of musical activity between 1795 and 1813.

Noting the lack of an immediately identifiable institutional focus for the performance of symphonic repertory in London during the years after Haydn's departure, Chapter 3 focuses on more individually organized musical events. It traces the activity of two musicians who are known to have appeared regularly in London around the time of Haydn's visits and to have taken leading roles at the Philharmonic. The violinist Johann Peter Salomon was the man finally to bring Haydn to London in 1791 and to mastermind the Haydn–Salomon concerts at the Hanover Square Rooms. He was an original member of the Philharmonic Society and leader at its Inaugural Concert of 8 March 1813. Franz Cramer, also a violinist and original member of the Philharmonic, was the son and pupil of Wilhelm Cramer, the principal organizer of the Professional Concerts and, as such, the leading advocate of Austro-Germanic orchestral music in London before Salomon. By exploring the involvement of these musicians at a range of subscription and benefit concerts given between 1795 and 1813, the chapter illustrates that, as both performers and entrepreneurs, they took a leading role in the promotion and dissemination of orchestral repertory in London during the supposedly 'dark age'.

Chapter 4 suggests that, whilst the period 1795 to 1813 witnessed no obvious focal point for the performance of orchestral music, such repertory

continued to be included within otherwise vocally dominated arenas such as the annual benefit concerts of the New Musical Fund and at subscription series such as the Vocal Concerts (1801–21) and Billington–Naldi–Braham performances (1808–10). Exploring the organizational structure, the programme content and the personnel involved with the subscription series suggests that the Vocal Concerts in particular present themselves as a potentially highly significant context for the founding of the Philharmonic: not only did they consistently introduce a body of predominantly Austro-Germanic symphonic works but the concerts were run by an increasingly stable collective of professional musicians.

Chapters 5 and 6 begin to move away from the activity of London's fashionable West End and, as a result, from the traditional focus of concert studies. The first part of Chapter 5 considers the inclusion of orchestral repertory within the pleasure garden concerts at Vauxhall and Ranelagh, suggesting that, despite the continued expansion of late eighteenth-century West End concert life, the pleasure garden performances may have provided the greatest opportunity for the largest sector of the London public to gain regular access to orchestral repertory. Further consideration of the widening of musical audiences is given in the second part of the chapter, where attention turns towards the mercantile 'City' area of the London metropolis and the suggestion that the musical culture centred upon the network of professionally driven performance clubs provides a vital context for both the development of symphonic repertory in London and the emergence of a markedly more serious attitude towards musical consumption. Chapter 6 examines the concept of the private or domestic concert and the increasingly popular practice of performing music heard in public concerts via the medium of piano and/or chamber music arrangements.

Although this discussion is intended to counter the dominant myth through the uncovering of a continued and developing orchestral tradition in London during the years after Haydn's departure, what results is not simply a negation of the significance of the Philharmonic. Rather, the study serves to re-evaluate the precise nature of the Society's achievements, suggesting that, far from constituting a radical new departure in London concert life, the events of 1813 might be seen to represent the culmination of a number of new developments in the city. By reintegrating the period 1795 to 1813 into the narrative of English orchestral performance, the discussion serves to heighten the significance of the Philharmonic, positioning it as the first public articulation of important new trends in musical, and by implication social and cultural, organization.

Indeed, it is one of the central claims of this study that the events of 1813 represented not only the reinstitutionalization of a particular strand of repertory but, through it, the emergence of a new voice within London's musical culture. More specifically, the concentration on orchestral repertory witnessed at the Philharmonic Society represented the initial manifestation of professional opposition to the traditionally dominant fashionable aesthetic associated with the Italian opera at the King's Theatre. Such an alignment of repertory with social and professional groupings leads, in the concluding chapter, to a consideration not only of the integration of symphonic music into earlier concert series but of the way in which this was combined with other culturally coded repertory types. The relationship between vocal and instrumental forms, 'ancient' and 'modern' works, and native and foreign compositions begins to be read as a deliberate negotiation between tastes, prompting the suggestion that the founding of the Philharmonic Society marked a key milestone in the development of an anti-Italianate musical culture in London and thus a pivotal shift in matters of cultural leadership.

## Source material and methodology

This study relies heavily on contemporary concert programmes, whether preserved as individual objects or as part of newspaper advertisements. It uses these documents not simply as records of orchestral performance but as a means to explore the process of mediation between repertory types – and by implication musical tastes and social groupings – taking place within a variety of early nineteenth-century performance spheres. As such, it owes much to the pioneering work of William Weber, whose coupling of the contemporary concept of 'miscellany' with the accepted notion of 'homogeneity' introduced a new vocabulary into discussions of programme structure and whose exploration of patterns of programming over a far greater time period provides both an inspiration and a methodological backdrop to this study.

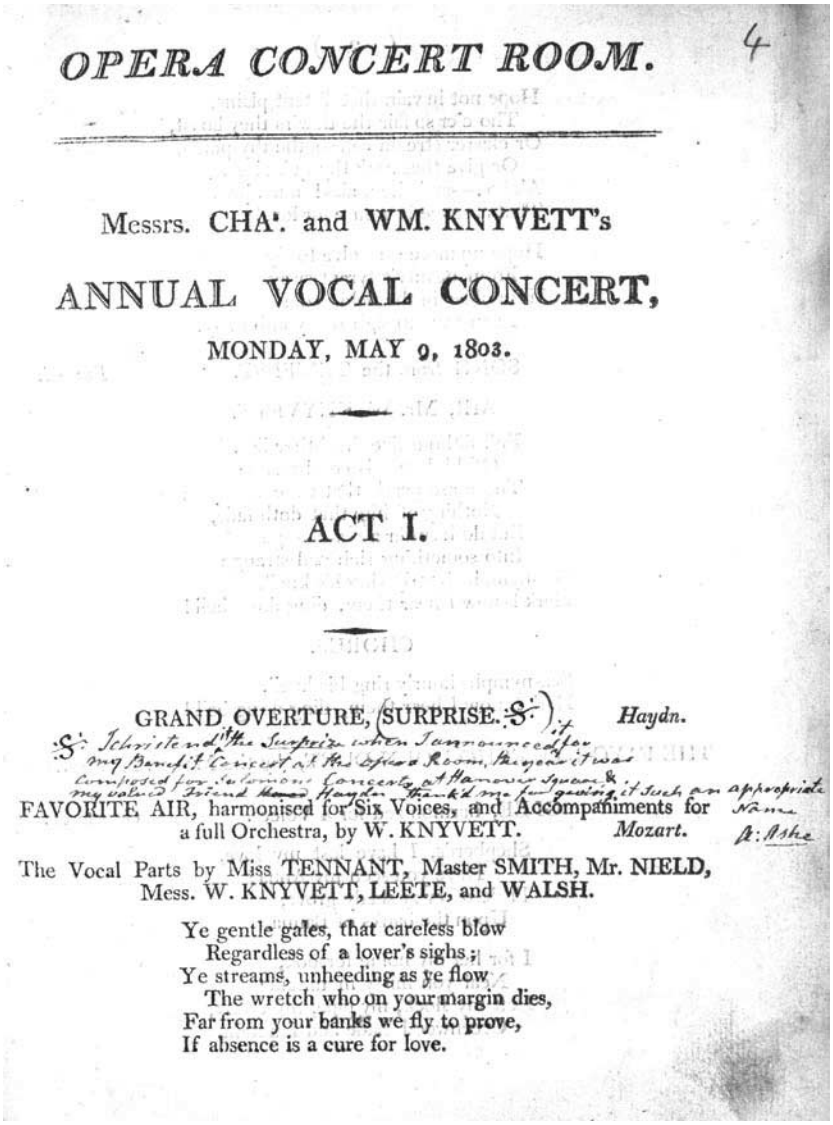
In *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste*,[2] Weber provides his most extensive illustration to date of the complex issues underpinning the construction of concert programmes and of the manner in which these have changed over time. Within the relatively restricted environment of the late eighteenth-century public concert, the dominant principle of miscellany was seen most obviously in the strict alternation of vocal and instrumental items: concerts combined orchestral works with vocal and instrumental solos, many of which reflected the continuing influence of the Italian opera

house. Whilst Weber argues for a greater homogeneity within nineteenth-century programmes, the relationship between vocal and instrumental repertory remained central, making it significant that, despite eventually breaking its own ruling, the founding documents of the Philharmonic Society displayed an entirely unequivocal stance, banning instrumental concertos and all solo vocal items at its concerts.

Weber has also considered the balance of 'native' and 'foreign' and 'new' and 'old' repertories within concert programmes of this period. Novelty was one of the driving forces of West End concert culture during the final quarter of the eighteenth century; yet, in contrast to many other European centres at the time, England boasted a long-standing tradition of valuing older compositions.[3] Particularly with the founding of the Concerts of Ancient Music in 1776, the intellectual debate between the lasting musical value of the 'ancient' repertory and the short-term excitement of the 'modern' style reached a new level in the public consciousness.[4] In declaring its intention to focus on not only the 'best' but also the 'most approved instrumental music', therefore, the Philharmonic immediately implied a new role for the body of orchestral works to be promoted therein.

Once described as the 'Cinderellas' of music resources,[5] concert programmes have recently come to be seen as viable objects of study within all manner of scholarly circles. Perhaps prompted by this, a number of resource enhancement schemes have sought to improve access to these notoriously slippery pieces of performance ephemera.[6] Locating complete programmes for this relatively early period in their history can still prove problematic, however, and, as H. C. Robbins Landon has shown, scholars of the period of Haydn's London residency are grateful for the extensive newspaper coverage afforded to the composer's activity and for the fact that the fashionable press – notably the *Morning Chronicle* and *The Times* – consistently provided programme listings and performance reviews. That the level of musical coverage in newspaper sources dipped after Haydn's departure is, by contrast, one of the principal reasons for the persistence of the Philharmonic 'myth'.

Crucial to the challenging of this 'myth' has been the relatively fortuitous discovery of a collection of programmes compiled by the London-based flautist Andrew Ashe.[7] Brief reference is made to this collection by Robbins Landon, who notes that 'in a volume of old programmes owned by Ashe and with his bookplate, now in the Bodleian Library at Oxford there is a programme of the Opera Concert Room for 9 May 1803 which begins with the "Grand Overture, Surprise"'.[8] Whilst this individual programme is notable for the handwritten annotation accompanying the Haydn piece



OPERA CONCERT ROOM.

Messrs. CHA^s. and WM. KNYVETT's

ANNUAL VOCAL CONCERT,

MONDAY, MAY 9, 1803.

ACT I.

GRAND OVERTURE, (SURPRISE.) *Haydn.*

FAVORITE AIR, harmonised for Six Voices, and Accompaniments for a full Orchestra, by W. KNYVETT. *Mozart.*

The Vocal Parts by Miss TENNANT, Master SMITH, Mr. NIELD, Mess. W. KNYVETT, LEETE, and WALSH.

Ye gentle gales, that careless blow
Regardless of a lover's sighs;
Ye streams, unheeding as ye flow
The wretch who on your margin dies,
Far from your banks we fly to prove,
If absence is a cure for love.

**Illustration 1** Messrs Cha. and Wm. Knyvett's Annual Vocal Concert, Monday May 9, 1803 (Ashe, 17405 d.6, item 4 – Opera Concert Room)

(Illustration 1), of greater significance is the fact that it forms part of a far larger collection. Housed at shelf mark 17405 d.6-12 of the Bodleian Library are over 300 programmes from the years 1803 to 1818, arranged in a largely chronological fashion across seven bound volumes. The collection is remarkable not only for its size but for the extent of its coverage, including material for both public and private concerts in London and for performances given in various English provincial centres. Although certain

items replicate material that is otherwise widely available – notably the large number of programmes for the Concerts of Ancient Music – the collection includes extensive runs for the Vocal Concerts (1806–15) and other series, many of which would appear to be unique.

In addition to concert programmes, the collection contains a range of secondary material relating to the performances that it documents, including detailed lists of the vocal, instrumental and orchestral performers, announcements concerning the organization of the series and information regarding the subscribers (and by implication audience members) for the concerts. Such information – whether gained from these programmes, newspapers or other similar sources – is as important to this study as the programme listings themselves, allowing as it does for an insight into the personnel facilitating the success, or otherwise, of these concerts. It is through the association of repertory with particular promoters, performers and audiences that that repertory takes on its culturally coded significance.

The principal collection of material relating to the Philharmonic Society is that acquired by the British Library, London in November 2002.[9] Comprising over 270 manuscript items, including the Society's working papers, minute books and correspondence, the RPS archive offers an invaluable insight into the mechanics of the organization. Also held by the British Library is a collection of annotated programmes for the first fifty-six seasons of performances, compiled by founding member of the Society, Sir George Smart.[10]

Many programmes from this period retain certain vagaries in their description of musical works. As the discussion in Chapter 3 will illustrate, this is particularly so in respect of orchestral pieces, where the lack of text, coupled with the failure to record catalogue numbers and/or key signatures, often makes it difficult to establish precisely which work by a particular composer was performed.[11] More fundamentally, eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century programmes display a certain fluidity of terminology in respect of orchestral pieces. Whilst the term 'overture' was frequently used in the modern sense – that is, to describe a single-movement piece, often derived from the start of a theatrical or operatic piece – the same title also appears in relation to works which would now only be referred to as symphonies: Haydn's 'London' symphonies, for example, were typically described as 'Overtures' in the press advertisements for their first performance. For the purposes of this study, both are considered to constitute orchestral works and are counted together in any tally of the contribution made by a particular composer.

Every attempt has been made to transcribe concert programmes as accurately as possible. Both here, and in the quotation of primary source material

more generally, the original spelling has been retained for composers and performers who are otherwise referred to in the main body of the text by the accepted modern form of their name: see, for example, Niccolò Jommelli, who was widely referred to as Niccolò Jomelli in eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century writing. The principal biographical sources have been *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Second Edition and Highfill *et al.* In cases where little or no biographical information can be found, or where additional studies have been of particular interest, endnote references supplement the main text.

## A revised opinion

In focusing on the nature and extent of orchestral performance in London during the period 1795 to 1813, this study addresses an issue which, even within the recent growth of scholarly interest in music in nineteenth-century Britain, remains relatively under-explored. Yet, in seeking to challenge the privileged historical position of the Philharmonic Society and the dominant narrative of the Philharmonic 'myth', what follows resonates strongly with the principal aesthetic of the so-called 'new' or 'post-modern' musicology. Whilst much has been gained from the recent critical re-evaluation of the traditional agents of music history – the great composers, works and institutions – it is important to acknowledge an inherent danger in this approach: in attempting to challenge established narratives, scholars must ensure that the materials used to make such a challenge serve to do more than simply provide a replacement narrative or create an alternative myth.[12] With this in mind, what follows aims neither to correct traditional impressions of the individual significance of the Philharmonic nor to advance the claims of any other musical agent(s). Rather, it looks to place the Society at the heart of what Gary Tomlinson has referred to as a 'web of culture',[13] playing down the supposedly 'revolutionary' status articulated by its founders in favour of seeing the Philharmonic as a key cultural milestone in the development of London's modern concert culture. The events of 1813 become part of a process of musical, social and cultural development which neither begins nor ends with the activity of the Philharmonic. Simultaneously, the Philharmonic becomes far more than just an orchestral series and its associated myth is, ironically, shown to have hidden far more than it reveals.

# 1 The makings of a myth: from Haydn to the Philharmonic

This study will examine historically and critically the now-established truism that the period 1795 to 1813 represents a 'dark age' in the history of musical performance in England. More specifically, it will address the suggestion that the founding of the Philharmonic Society in 1813 provided the first significant outlet for the performance of symphonic repertory in London since the departure of Haydn from the city some eighteen years earlier. In seeking to establish how and why such negative impressions of the period may have originally emerged, this chapter will begin by identifying two more established milestones in the history of English orchestral performance, outlining the events surrounding Haydn's London residency of 1791 to 1795 and the founding of the Philharmonic Society in 1813. Focussing on the early publications of the latter, it will illustrate that the roots of the Philharmonic 'myth' may in many ways be found to lie therein.

## Haydn in London concert life

Although a Haydn symphony may have first been heard in London as early as 1770, Simon McVeigh notes that it was only with the introduction of No. 53 in 1781 that the composer began to achieve any significant standing in the city.[1] With the death of J. C. Bach at the start of the following year resulting in the eventual demise of the previously dominant Bach–Abel concerts,[2] the stage was set for a radical change in London's musical organization, as well as for the introduction of a considerably broader symphonic repertory.[3] Haydn was the most obvious beneficiary, his popularity soaring after 1783 as his works were adopted as the mainstay of first Lord Abingdon's concerts and then the so-called Professional series.[4] By 1785 as many as seventeen Haydn symphonies had been published (and presumably performed) in this country,[5] and his dominance of London concert life was remarkable enough for one commentator to note that 'Sig. Haydn's compositions are at present so popular that his name is a sufficient recommendation to almost anything'.[6]

Fuelling the interest in Haydn's music throughout this period may have been the continual speculation that the composer himself was about to be lured to England, a promise first made by Lord Abingdon in advance of his 1783 concert series.[7] Although unable to do so until the early years of the following decade, it was a former member of the Professional Concerts – the German-born violinist Johann Peter Salomon – who, taking advantage of a change in Haydn's professional circumstances,[8] ensured that the composer did eventually reach English shores, returning with him on New Year's Day 1791.[9] Haydn spent four of the next five concert seasons in London, appearing in annual series of West End subscription performances organized initially by Salomon himself and then, during the 1795 season, by the Italian violinist Giovanni Battista Viotti.[10] At each of these series Haydn featured as both a performer and composer.[11] His most notable achievements in the latter capacity were the so-called 'London' symphonies, all twelve of which received their first performances during these years under his immediate direction.[12]

Whilst these new compositions provided the main attraction of Haydn's stay, such was the popularity of his music prior to his arrival in the city that a number of older works continued to be performed.[13] Opportunities to hear his music were not restricted to the Haydn–Salomon or Opera concerts, therefore, as earlier symphonies featured regularly at both the Professional Concerts and at the more sporadically organized benefit performances.[14] By the time the 'inimitable Haydn' finally left London, late in 1795, his works were firmly established at the heart of the capital's concert culture and his name had become accepted as almost synonymous with orchestral composition. Charles Burney noted that 'intelligent music readers … can no more help thinking of HAYDN when *symphonies* are mentioned, than of HANDEL when *oratorio choruses* are in question'.[15]

Burney's appeal to 'intelligent music readers' and his comparison with Handel's oratorios is significant. It serves not only to confirm the centrality of Haydn's symphonies to London concert life by the mid 1790s but to align these works with one of its dominant aesthetic debates. This debate, which has previously been explored in detail by Howard Irving, formed the subject of a number of lectures given during the early years of the nineteenth century by the Heather Professor of Music, Dr William Crotch.[16] Here, Crotch traced what he perceived to be the principal developments in British musical culture over the preceding four decades, positioning these against the backdrop of a fundamental conflict of ideas and suggesting that a complex network of changes to both the nature and extent of