

Introduction

Charles Burney (see Figure 1) is mainly known today for his outstanding contribution to the history of music. His initial training was that of a musician, and more specifically that of a harpsichordist and organist. His project of writing a *General History of Music from the earliest ages to the present Period*, published in four volumes between 1776 (the very year of the publication of John Hawkins's rival *General History of the Science and Practice of Music*) and 1789, originated in his deep personal interest in music, of course, but also in his wish to raise himself above the status of practising musician and to become a 'man of letters'. His ambition was to 'bridge . . . the considerable gulf that separated the musician from the world of polite letters'.¹ His success was confirmed by his acceptance within the circle of Henry and Hester Lynch Thrale at Streatham Park,² and he took pride in his contacts and exchanges with numerous writers in England as well as abroad (Dr Johnson, Garrick, Twining, Mason, Metastasio, Padre Martini, Rousseau, Diderot and Voltaire, to name but a few).

Whereas Dr Burney's writings are often referred to and quoted in studies on eighteenth-century music, it is somewhat paradoxical that not much interest seems to have been given specifically to his relation to the organ, on which he was a proficient performer, and which played an important part in his professional career as a practising musician. Burney's love of the organ, which he called 'that most comprehensive of all instruments' (*History* II, 423), appears to have been deep, sincere and lasting. As Percy A. Scholes noted, 'the organ provided a background to Burney's whole musical life'.³ As we shall see, Burney maintained a position as an organist in various churches throughout his life and, in the course of his travels abroad, he never missed an opportunity to visit organs of interest.

Burneyan scholarship has rightly been dominated by Roger Lonsdale's *Dr Charles Burney, a Literary Biography* and Percy A. Scholes's *The Great Dr Burney*.⁴ Lawrence Lipking also provided a very interesting interpretation of the epistemological significance of Burney's *History of Music* in his study *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England*.⁵ These wide-ranging

¹ Roger Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney, a Literary Biography* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1965), 108.

² Valerie Rumbold, 'Music Aspires to Letters: Charles Burney, Queeney Thrale and the Streatham Circle', *Music & Letters*, vol. 74, no. 1 (Feb., 1993), 24–38, 24.

³ Percy A. Scholes, *A New Enquiry into the Life and Work of Dr Burney* (London: Proceedings of the Musical Association, Session LXVII, 1941), 1–30.

⁴ Percy A. Scholes's *The Great Dr Burney* (London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1948).

⁵ Lawrence Lipking, *The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1970).



Figure 1 George Dance, *Charles Burney*, pencil, 1794. © London, National Portrait Gallery

works occasionally mention Burney's interest in the organ, but, understandably, they do not pay particular attention to this aspect of his activity. Burney's numerous writings (the *History of Music*, the accounts of his travels on the continent to collect material for the former, numerous remarks in his personal papers and letters, his *Account of the Commemoration of Handel*, and his contribution to Rees's *Cyclopaedia*, for which he wrote the chapter on the organ) provide a unique wealth of information that can greatly contribute to helping us figure out the way the organ was conceived in the English eighteenth-century psyche. In this Element, I endeavour to capture Burney's views on the organ as a musical instrument and to outline his conception of the qualities required in both the organ and organists.

However, this Element encompasses a broader range of issues than those simply concerning its main protagonist, Dr Burney, and his favourite instrument. Taken together, Burney's remarks on the organ, organists and organ music construct a coherent discourse on taste and constitute an aesthetic. They also enable a 'reading' of English society in the eighteenth century through the magnifying glass of one particular musical instrument, the organ, for, as we shall see, Burney's view of the organ is indicative of a broader ethos of moderation that permeates his whole work and is at one with the dominant moral philosophy of Georgian England. This conception is ripe with patriotic

undertones, while it also articulates a constant plea for politeness as a condition for harmonious social interaction. The underlying assumption of our approach is that musical instruments help construct an *imaginaire*, or imagined representation of the world, that is ripe with aesthetic, social and ethical meanings that go well beyond their purely musical functions or roles. By tracing the evolution of the English organ back to the Restoration and setting Burney's remarks on the instrument in their historical context, it is possible to see how the instrument and its repertoire reflected the social and philosophical ideals of Georgian England.

1 Burney, the Professional Organist

The 'first Music he [Burney] learned was of M^r Baker the Organist of the Cathedral [of Chester] who being distressed for an assistant during a fit of the Gout, taught [him] to play a Chant on the Organ before he knew his Gamut or the names of the keys', Burney wrote in the manuscript memoirs of his life (*Memoirs*, 23). The young boy soon learned to play a few more chants and a few songs by Handel, 'w^{ch} he performed without knowing a word of Italian or hardly a note of Music'. He then pursued his musical studies under his half-brother James Burney, organist of St Mary's, Shrewsbury. James, Burney explained, 'had a very good finger, & what he attempted, w^{ch} was neither very brilliant nor elaborate he executed neatly. He had however, no application for the slavery of conquering difficulties in the Lessons of the Times; & his want of Licence as well as fancy prevented his Voluntaries from rising above poverty & common-place' (*Memoirs*, 33). By contrast, when 'the Celebrated Felton, from Hereford, & after him the 1st D^r Hayes, from Oxford, came to Shrewsbury on a Tour', the young Charles Burney was 'struck & stimulated . . . so forcibly by their performance on the Organ as well as encouragm^t that [he] went to work with an ambition & fury that w^d hardly allow [him] to eat or sleep'. He then went back to Chester where, in 1744, the organist and composer Thomas Augustine Arne (1710–78), on his way back from Dublin to London, offered to take him as an apprentice, to which Charles's father consented. Burney accompanied his master to London and worked very hard for him, transcribing music and playing in various orchestras, without any personal pecuniary profit but learning much through first-hand experience, until the eccentric, wealthy and refined Fulke Greville (1717–1806), Member of Parliament and High Sheriff of Wiltshire, took an interest in him and released him from his apprenticeship by hiring him in 1746. In 1753, Burney was to write a poem dedicated to Fulke Greville, in which he evoked the most famous English composers of the time (*Letters*, 'To Fulke Greville': King's Lynn, July 1753).

Once his initial training was over, Charles Burney acquired various successive positions as an organist. In 1749, aged twenty-three and with a young wife

and child to support, he paid the fees to become a Freeman of the Musicians' Company,⁶ and applied for the post of organist of St Dionis Backchurch,⁷ with an annual salary of £30, succeeding the renowned organist and composer Philip Hart, who had been involved in the designing of the church's organ. Burney was elected with a huge majority of fifty votes, 'followed by Gilding (afterwards organist of St Edmund the King and Martyr, Lombard Street) with four, Larkin with one, and the other six with none at all',⁸ which is an indication of Burney's proficiency on the organ. He was officially appointed on 26 October 1749 and was to retain this position until his resignation in 1752, when he was succeeded by John Bennett.⁹ St Dionis Backchurch was a small, wealthy parish church in the Langbourn ward of the City of London (see Figure 2).¹⁰ The church had been built to the design of Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London, when, owing to the growing population of London, Parliament had passed an act in 1711 for the building of fifty new churches in the City of London and Westminster.¹¹

The organ had originally been built by Renatus Harris in 1724,¹² and approved by a board of experts including Croft, Handel and Loeillet.¹³ As Richard Pratt has shown, the contract (which is still preserved) is quite similar to that of the Gerard Smith organ for St George's Hanover Square, built at the same time (1724–25).¹⁴ Harris had a great reputation and this may be why Gerard Smith's project closely followed the specification of the organ at St Dionis Backchurch. This organ, the last instrument built by Renatus Harris, had three manuals and 1,541 pipes, and cost £585.¹⁵ It was probably an 'influential instrument' at the time, which set 'a new model for organs in wealthy parish churches', as Stephen Bicknell has remarked.¹⁶ In particular, one can notice the French influence in the mutations on the Great and the proliferation and variety

⁶ See Donovan Dawe, *The Organists of the City of London, 1666–1850: a Record of One-Thousand Organists* (Padstow: Donovan Dawe, 1983), 12.

⁷ Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney*, 23.

⁸ Parish records, mentioned by F. G. Edwards, *Musical Times*, July 1904. See Scholes, *The Great Dr Burney*, vol. I, 51.

⁹ See Dawe, *Organists of the City of London*, 39.

¹⁰ See 'St Dionis Backchurch', in www.londonlives.org/static/StDionisBackchurch.jsp.

¹¹ It was demolished in 1878. A photograph of the organ case (c.1870) held in the National Historic Archive is reproduced in Stephen Bicknell, *The History of the English Organ* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 159.

¹² See James Boeringer, *Organa Britannica – Organs in Great Britain 1660–1860* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1986), vol. II, 164–6.

¹³ Richard Platt, 'Plagiarism or Emulation: the Gerard Smith Organ Contract for St George's Church, Hanover Square', *BIOS Journal*, no. 17 (1997), 32–46, 40; Bicknell, *History of the English Organ*, 157.

¹⁴ Platt, 'Plagiarism or Emulation', 32.

¹⁵ Nicholas M. Plumley, *The Organs of the City of London* (Oxford: Positif Press, 1996), 147.

¹⁶ Bicknell, *History of the English Organ*, 157.

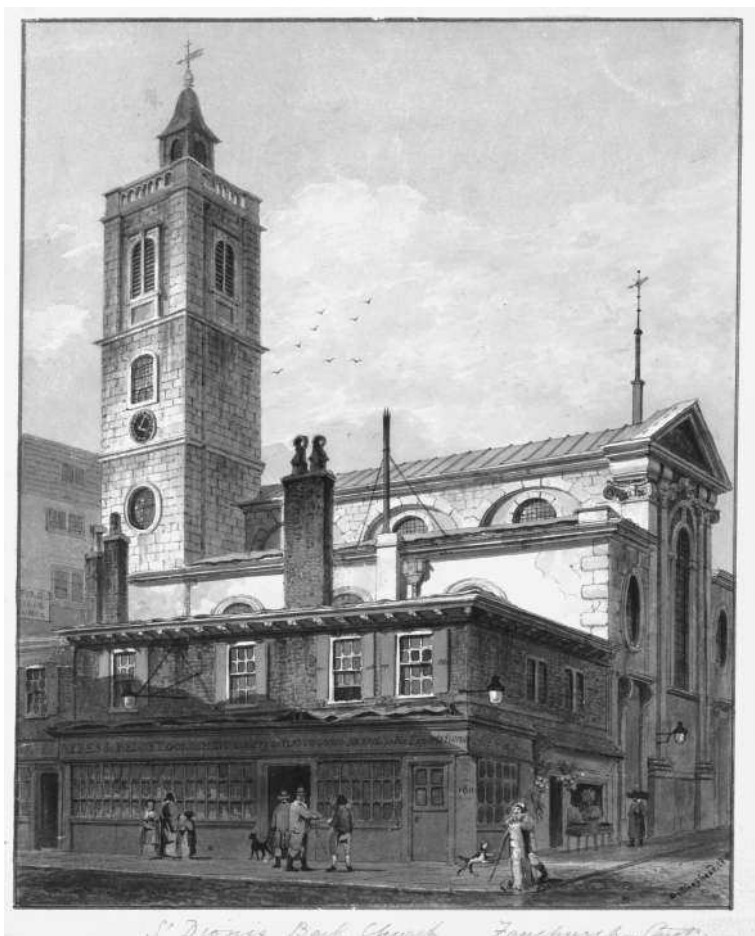


Figure 2 George Shepherd, *View of St Dionis Backchurch*, 1811, Crace XXIII.30. © The Trustees of the British Museum

of the reed stops (ten out of twenty-five stops in all), intended to imitate as well as possible the original sounds of the human voice and the instruments after which the stops were named. The aim was imitative variety, which ‘provided the background for the habits of organists’ in England in the eighteenth century, as the ‘sounds of the English organ were partly related to the character of contemporary instrumental playing’.¹⁷ Harris’s organs were reputed for their fullness and smoothness of tone (as opposed to the brilliance of Father Smith’s organs) and they paved the way for the delicate and sophisticated sound of late Georgian organs (such as those of Samuel Green, in particular). The organ was rather new

¹⁷ Bicknell, *History of the English Organ*, 162.

when the young Burney was appointed at St Dionis Backchurch. It must have been quite a sensational instrument of which to be in charge, and one can surmise that it contributed substantially to the shaping of Burney’s own taste in organs (Table 1).

Soon after his election at St Dionis Backchurch, Burney was also appointed to replace the blind organist and composer John Stanley for a new concert series at the King’s Arms Tavern, which replaced the concerts previously held at the Swan Tavern after the latter was destroyed by the great fire in Cornhill in 1748.¹⁸ Stanley and Sir Joseph Hankey, who ran the initial series, had quarrelled, and so Burney was chosen to preside at the organ and harpsichord, which he undertook ‘with fear and trembling, being always extremely timid in public playing’. On the very first night, he executed an organ concerto of his own composition, ‘in w^{ch} [he] had not forgotten the sweetness of the Hautbois stop in the Adagio, w^{ch} by means of the swell and accompaniments of the [*blank*] happened to please’, as he explained in his *Memoirs* (*Memoirs*, 91). Following a fashion introduced by Handel, the organ concerto had acquired a particular significance in England. William Mason wrote that Handel’s intention in

Table 1 St Dionis Backchurch: Stop list*

Great	Choir	Swell
Open Diapason	Open Diapason to mid-C	Open Diapason
Stop ^d Diapason	Stop ^d Diapason to gamut	Stop ^d Diapason
Principal	Principal	Principal
Twelfth	Flute	Cornet III
Fifteenth	Fifteenth	Trumpet
Tierce	Bassoon	Cremona
Larigot	French Horn to D	Vox Humana
Sesquialtera IV	Cremona (from Great)	
Trumpet	Clarion (from Great)	
Cremona or French Horn		
Clarion		
Cornet V		

* From Bicknell, *The History of the English Organ*, 158; *The Leffler Manuscript* (c.1802–16), facsimile edition with introduction by Peter Williams (Reigate: B. I. O. S., 2010), 192. Leffler attributed the building of the organ to Byfield, Bridge and Jordan in 1732 and the stop list he gave differs somewhat from Bicknell’s. Notably, Leffler mentioned a French Horn instead of a Cremona on the Great.

¹⁸ Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney*, 23–4.

erecting an organ upon the theatre stage was ‘undoubtedly to difference as much by its dignified form, as by its solemn tones, that semi-dramatic species of composition the Oratorio from a genuine Opera’.¹⁹ The genre perfectly articulated the two conflicting demands of seriousness and elegant entertainment, which the members of polite society valued highly.²⁰ Other composers of organ concertos in the period capitalised on what Handel’s organ concertos had initiated, and so did Burney. Thus, by performing his own organ concerto, Burney symbolically took the place of, and assumed the role of, Handel and Stanley. Thanks to this double appointment at St Dionis Backchurch and the King’s Arms Tavern concerts, Burney rapidly acquired a good reputation as an organist. He appeared as a soloist in other public concerts and, consequently, his income increased substantially.

In 1751, however, he fell very ill and was confined to his bed for three months with severe fever. His physician, Dr John Armstrong, ‘insisted that Burney leave the smoky atmosphere of London’²¹ and consequently Burney and his family moved to King’s Lynn in 1752, where, upon the death of John Barlow, the incumbent organist at St Margaret’s, Burney was offered the post, thanks to the intercession of Sir John Turner, third Baronet and Member of Parliament for King’s Lynn.²² Burney was to stay there until 1760. The normal salary of £20 was increased by subscription to £100 (a substantial sum at the time), ‘as an encouragement’ to a regular bred musician of some character to come down from the capital to instruct the children of the principal families in the town and Neighbourhood in Music’.²³ Burney initially found the organ of St Margaret’s ‘excecrably bad [*sic*]’ and the local citizens crude and ignorant, as he reported in his *Memoirs* and wrote to his wife in a letter (*Letters*, ‘To Mrs Burney’, 30 September 1751). On Burney’s advice and recommendation, the Swiss-born organ builder John Snetzler was entrusted with the construction of a new instrument at a cost of £700.²⁴ On 28 March 1754, the *London Evening Post* published the following announcement: ‘Last Sunday the new Organ at King’s Lynn, Norfolk, erected in St Margaret’s Church by Mr. John Snetzler, of Oxford Road, was opened by Mr. Burney, and gave the utmost Satisfaction, being for

¹⁹ William Mason, *Essays, Historical and Critical, on English Church Music* (York, 1795) republished in *The Works of William Mason* (London: T. Cadell and W. Davies, 1811), 72–3. See Pierre Dubois, ‘Generic Hybridization of the Organ Voluntary, from Henry Purcell to William Russell’, in *Palette pour Marie-Madeleine Martinet*, <http://www.csti.paris-sorbonne.fr/centre/palette/txt/duboisMMMthesesHDR03.pdf>, 2016.

²⁰ See Pierre Dubois, ‘The Socio-Cultural Semiotics of Handel’s Organ Concertos’, *B. I. O. S. Journal*, no. 34 (2010), 68–81.

²¹ Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney*, 36. ²² Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney*, 37.

²³ Quoted in Lonsdale, *Dr Charles Burney*, 37.

²⁴ Alan Barnes and Martin Renshaw, *The Life and Work of John Snetzler* (Aldershot: Scolar Press, 1994), 83.



Figure 3 The Snetzler organ in King's Lynn, in its current position © Pierre Dubois

Sweetness of Tone and variety of Stops, universally esteemed one of the finest Instruments in England.²⁵

The King's Lynn organ (see Figure 3) was important in Snetzler's career as it established his reputation. It was his largest instrument (with twenty-seven stops; Table 2). The Harris organ at St Dionis Backchurch, discussed above, may have been a model for the King's Lynn instrument,²⁶ as the presence of a French Horn, in particular, may suggest.²⁷ It had a 'Great Bourdon', which was a novelty. Burney wrote that this 'bordun' is 'an octave below the Open Diapason, and has the effect of a double bass in the chorus' (*History*, II, 345 n.). Another novelty was the Dulciana stop. The King's Lynn organ was the first instrument into which this stop had been introduced in England. According to Burney himself, Snetzler,

a worthy man & excellent workman, had, during his Apprenticeship, worked at the celebrated Organ at Harlem, in Holland; and introduced several Stops into the Lynn Organ, from that renowned instrument, particularly the *Dulciana* stop, of w^{ch} the tone is extremely sweet & delicate. It is now introduced as

²⁵ Quoted in Scholes, *The Great Dr Burney*, 79.

²⁶ Barnes and Renshaw, *The Life and Work of John Snetzler*, 27, 280.

²⁷ Barnes and Renshaw, *The Life and Work of John Snetzler*, 258.

Table 2 King’s Lynn: Stop list*

Great	Choir	Swell
Double Diapason to CC	Dulciana	Open Diapason
Open Diapason	Stop ^d Diapason	Stop ^d Diapason
Stop ^d Diapason	Principal	Dulciana
Principal	Flute	German Flute to mid-C
Twelfth	Fifteenth	Cornet 4 ranks
Fifteenth	Bassoon to G above mid-C	French Horn
Tierce	Vox Humana	Trumpet
Sesquialtera V		Hautboy
Furniture VI		
Trumpet		
Clarion		
Cornet VII [<i>sic</i>] to C		

* From the ‘Sperling Notebook’, quoted in Boeringer, *Organa Britannica*, vol. II, 349. See also the *Leffler Manuscript*, 143.

a solo stop in all our best Chamber Organs, and has this advantage over the reed Stops, that is [*sic*] stands in tune as well as the open diapason, wth w^{ch} it is in unison. (*Memoirs*,117)

The Dulciana consists of narrow-scaled, cylindrical pipes and it produces a very soft, delicate sound, not unlike that produced by a Salicional or a Viola da Gamba. That this particular stop was introduced in King’s Lynn precisely at the time when Burney supervised the reconstruction of the organ is therefore a telling indication of the conception he had of the instrument, and of the importance he gave to a reserved, moderate volume of sound, as opposed to excessive power or ‘noise’, as we shall see below. On the Snetzler organ at King’s Lynn, the Dulciana had a full compass down to G’, so that it was conceived as a ‘suitable accompanimental stop’, and ‘in this Burney was well ahead of his time, for this use of a Dulciana instead of an Open Diapason in a church organ was not revived until towards the end of the century’.²⁸

The probable recommendation of Snetzler reveals Burney’s readiness to embrace novelty. With its bright chorus, its numerous reed stops, its swell that included various solo reed stops and a German Flute and its two newly introduced Dulciana stops, the softness of which was generally admired, the King’s

²⁸ Barnes and Renshaw, *The Life and Work of John Snetzler*, 27.

Lynn organ (Figure 3) offered all the palette of sonorities of which a mid-century English organist could dream.

In 1760, Burney and his family (he now had six children) finally managed to return to London. While his health had been restored, his wife's deteriorated and she died in 1762. In 1768, Burney was appointed organist of the Oxford Chapel, Marylebone, later called St Peter's (after 1832), in Vere Street.²⁹ The chapel was built by Edward Harley, second Earl of Oxford, was designed by James Gibbs in 1722 and opened in 1724. It was originally intended as a Chapel of Ease to supplement All Souls, Langham Place, in the parish of Marylebone, as the population increased and the old church proved insufficient to receive all the parishioners.

The contract for the organ, signed by Christopher Schrider in 1722,³⁰ was submitted to the approval of Dr William Croft, organist of Westminster Abbey, and John Weldon, organist of the Chapel Royal. Christopher Schrider may have worked with Abraham Jordan.³¹

The Great Organ to contain the Open Diapason of metal in the front from C in alt' down to gamut, & the rest to answer by communication with the Stop Diapason or without and the base and the treble to be agreeable to the ear. The stop to contain 49 pipes. The Stop Diapason of wood & to contain 49 pipes. The Principal of metal & to contain 49 pipes. The Cornet of 3 ranks of metal 72 pipes. A Trumpet stop throughout with metal 49 pipes. The Fifteenth of metal 49 pipes.

The Chair Organ to have the Stop Diapason of 49 pipes. A flute stop of wood 49 pipes. A Cremona stop & to contain 49 pipes.³²

The instrument (Table 3) was apparently completed in 1724. As the contract shows, the organ was a small instrument with two manuals and a short compass of only forty-nine notes, which cost £300. It remained unaltered until 1852.

Compared to the Snetzler organ that Burney had played at St Margaret's, King's Lynn, the Oxford chapel instrument must have appeared somewhat limited. Ever concerned about social prestige and respectability, however, Burney certainly found the position interesting for its possible associations and the musical reputation of the chapel. The famous composer William Boyce had been the chapel's organist from 1734 to 1736, and it is interesting to note that this is generally assumed to be the very chapel whose interior is represented in

²⁹ Donovan Dawe remarks that the long-accepted date of 1763 for Burney's appointment to the Oxford Chapel is wrong and should in reality be 1768. Dawe, *The Organists of the City of London*, 85.

³⁰ Quoted in Colin Goulden, *The Organs of All Souls Church, Langham Place, London, and St Peter's Church, Vere Street, London* (London: All Soul's Church, 1976), 12.

³¹ Boeringer, *Organa Britannica*, vol. II, 311.

³² Quoted in Goulden, *The Organs of All Souls Church*, 12.