



Robert Terrell BLEDSOE,
Dickens, Journalism, Music:
“Household Words” and “All The Year Round”
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In 1868, the distinguished composer and teacher of music, George Alexander Macfarren, took to the pages of the *Cornhill Magazine* to refute what he called the “almost proverbial saying — ‘The English are not a musical people.’” Despite his efforts, and despite overwhelming material evidence to the contrary, the idea that the English were somehow unmusical would not go away, and when, in 1914, the German scholar Oscar A. H. Schmitz entitled a book about England *Das Land ohne Musik* there was little protest. Indeed Schmitz’s sobriquet, “the land without music,” has become so well known that it may be said to have eclipsed the “almost proverbial saying” Macfarren had tilted against. It is of course complete nonsense unless we buy into a Hegelian, Teutonic sort of history of music in which a series of great male geniuses advance the frontiers of musical expression one by one. Now we know where that great advance left music, we no longer need be intimidated by the cloud-capped mountains of German greatness, and a general shift in music studies, away from the individual composer and towards larger issues of musical culture, has done much to rehabilitate English music. It cannot be said that Victorian music, especially that from the first half of Victoria’s reign, has altogether escaped the prejudiced assumption that it is all glees and *Songs Without Words*, hymns and Handel, but the complexity, richness and interest of English musical life in that period is gradually winning scholarly, if not yet popular, recognition. The Ashgate series, “Music in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” launched in 2000, is one of the leading forums for this scholarship, and Bennett Zon’s “General Editor’s Series Preface” to that states:

Although the nineteenth century has often been viewed as a fallow period in British musical culture, it is clear from the vast extent of current scholarship that this view is entirely erroneous. Far from being a “land without music,” nineteenth-century

Britain abounded with musical activity. All society was affected by it, and everyone in that society recognized its importance in some way or other. It remains for us today to trace the significance of music and musical culture in that period ...

Robert Bledsoe's book, *Dickens, Journalism, Music: "Household Words" and "All The Year Round,"* is a valuable addition to this larger, recuperative project, and could indeed have found a natural place in the Ashgate series. Dickens certainly recognized the importance of music, both to the individual and to society, and there have been a considerable number of studies of the role of music in his fiction, starting with James T. Lightwood's book, *Charles Dickens and Music* (1912). Bledsoe's study takes a rather different approach, as the title suggests: it is hardly concerned with the novels at all (though they are regularly and authoritatively quoted when relevant), but rather looks at the way that Dickens, as editor, mediated ideas about music through his periodicals *Household Words* and *All The Year Round*. "Our focus ... is not primarily on novels, but on shorter pieces, musical articles that Dickens published but, for the most part, did not write" (8).

Household Words (1850–59) engaged with music in many ways: stories and poems described the effects of music, or used musical metaphors, while a wide range of essays discussed a wide range of music with varying degrees of seriousness. From the evidence Bledsoe presents, it appears that there was little interest in what we would now call instrumental music, whether for symphony orchestras or chamber groups. Rather, the focus was on the various manifestations of sung music, from popular song all the way up to grand opera in Paris, and in the music of the streets. The various contributors — writers like George Hogarth, George Augustus Sala and Henry Morley — did not all have the same interests or priorities, but Bledsoe argues, convincingly, that there is a unifying concern with the socially improving function of music: and he traces this ultimately to Dickens himself, the "Conductor" of the enterprise. In general, as the writers of *Household Words* looked around them, they saw much to celebrate. Technological and institutional advances had made "good" music available to a much wider cross section of society than ever before. As an early essay, "Music in Humble Life" by George Hogarth and W. H. Wills, put it on 11 May 1850: "The Muse is changing her associates; she is taking up with the humble and needy, and leaves nothing better to her aristocratic friends than their much-loved Italian Opera" (qtd. 29-30). But this diffusion of music and its beneficial effects raised concerns about both the top and bottom limits of its acceptable social range. At the top end, there was concern that "fashionable" audiences were still

trying to impose a certain social exclusivity on some kinds of music. At the bottom end, street music seemed increasingly noisy and disruptive. It was the latter issue that most divided the contributors, torn between applauding the democratization of music and lamenting that people now had music thrust upon them willy-nilly: “As *Household Words* sees it: because barrel organs familiarize people with respectable music, they are potentially good. On the other hand, we have a right to peace and quiet in our own homes” (51). What if the song of the cricket in *The Cricket on the Hearth* were to be drowned out by an organ grinder’s robust rendition of the latest Italian opera hits?

All The Year Round (1859–70) continued the socially improving project and its treatment of music was often simply an extension of what had been maintained in *Household Words*. There were, however, shifts of emphasis as well as an extension of the areas of music covered. There was more concern with instrumental music and with national style in music (mainly, I suspect, because of the influence of William Chappell’s *Popular Music of the Olden Time* [1859]). There were detailed accounts of particular musical instruments and of the new vogue for Handel festivals. But there was now less sympathy for street musicians as opposition to them came to a head with the M. P. Michael Bass’s successful attempt to amend the law in 1864: Dickens publically supported Bass. In terms of policing the lower end of musical entertainments, another battleground opened up with the rapid spread of music halls in these years. Dickens’s contributors disagreed on the issues of whether the music halls should be free to enter the existing entertainment market, and whether their offerings had an irredeemably negative impact on public taste. Dickens own position is unclear, but he was prepared to publish such fierce critiques as Charles Mackay’s “The Songs of the Music Halls” of 1868 which spoke of “sordid and dirty vulgarity” and maintained that: “There is no escaping the conclusion that the taste of a large mass of our countrymen is, in respect to some of the chief amusements which please them, steadily on the decline” (qtd. 107, 109). In general, there seems to have been a shift going on from thinking of “popular song” as a healthy, natural thing to thinking of it as a cynically manufactured commercial product.

The biggest change in *All The Year Round*, however, was the inclusion of many articles concerned with analysing and evaluating the classical music canon. Most of these were written by Henry F. Chorley, on whom Bledsoe is the leading authority — his standard study, *Henry Fothergill Chorley: Victorian Journalist*, was published in 1998. Quite why Dickens gave so much space to Chorley is something of a mystery. Bledsoe quotes Percy Fitzgerald, another contributor, to the effect that “[Chorley] did not do much for the magazine [*All The Year Round*], for his papers, being generally concerned with the

abstruse things of music, could not be acceptable to the ‘general reader’” (121). In response to this, Bledsoe suggests “several possible explanations” for why Dickens kept faith with Chorley:

perhaps it was because Dickens thought that they were in fact acceptable to the general reader; perhaps Dickens agreed with their didactic assessment of classical music to the extent that he thought they *ought* to be acceptable; perhaps Dickens personalized his editorial decisions in the 1860s so much that his affection for Chorley as a friend took precedence routinely and repeatedly over his professional judgment as editor. Some mixture of all these reasons is possible. (121-22)

Chorley was a conservative, championing the classical tradition of music running from Bach to early Beethoven and continued (in Chorley’s reading) by Mendelssohn. Composers who seemed to be challenging that tradition, from late Beethoven onwards, were subjected to vicious attacks, with the stakes set impossibly high. As Bledsoe amusingly summarises Chorley’s views: “If audiences ever come to accept Schumann . . . civilization will totter, and if they accept Wagner, it will fall” (125). Wagner was Chorley’s particular *bête noire*, and *All The Year Round* was thus made a mouthpiece for the pan-European anti-Wagner movement (Bledsoe has located “only one sympathetic mention of the ‘music of the future’ in *All The Year Round* during Dickens’s editorship” [125] — that, of course, was not by Chorley). Against Wagner, Chorley promoted Charles Gounod’s *Faust* (1859) as the great opera of modern times. It was an opera that Dickens, too, loved at first sight in Paris in 1863, when he was moved to tears: “it affected me so, and sounded in my ears so like a mournful echo of things that lie in my own heart” (qtd. 176).

It is worth noting, in the context of the present journal, that Bledsoe devotes two paragraphs of his account of *All The Year Round* to a fascinating but unattributed essay, apparently (on internal evidence) supplied by an American contributor, “Music Among the Japanese,” published on 11 May 1861 (81). The author of the essay describes his attempt to learn about Japanese music from the Japanese Embassy to the United States in 1860, as well as documenting the response of the Japanese to popular Western music. A unique moment of cultural exchange is vividly brought to life:

One after another, I jotted down their commonest melodies, to their infinite amazement. But when, after all was arranged, the drawing-room pianoforte was

approached, and their own native tunes came briskly out from under foreign fingers, their ecstasy was without limits — I could hardly say without bounds, since they testified it by leaping about in some cases like young kangaroos. The great men, and the lofty men, and the officers with two ancient swords of inestimable worth, and even the Treasury censor — the greatest creature among them except the three ambassadorial magnates themselves, who, I privately believe, listened at a partition, since they could not with dignity appear to share the festivities — all these came forth obedient to the glad tidings, and eager for the welcome sounds. And then, Sakanoto Tekeshiro, worthy medical and musical disciple of Apollo, or the corresponding Japanese deity, lifted his voice, and sang lustily; and his companions joined in the chorus, which they made very loud and very long; and this was the song they sang — the first Japanese song ever publicly heard outside their own land ... (*All The Year Round* 5: 151)

There then follows a transcription (words and music) of the traditional counting song 「ひとつとや」. Bledsoe simply summarizes the essay and does not identify the song, nor the protagonists involved in this extraordinary cultural event. But this was probably Dickens's closest approach, as a man of letters, to Japan and Japanese culture, and I strongly recommend a Japanese Dickens scholar to undertake further research into this fascinating essay!

After a long chapter devoted to *Household Words* and two long chapters devoted to *All The Year Round*, Bledsoe's fourth and final chapter is called "Music and Friendship." Here he looks in detail at what we know of Dickens's relationships with his "musical friends" — chiefly Pauline Viardot, Chorley and the Lehmanns — and their own interrelationships. This is a sort of perspectival biography in which elements of Dickens's life come into focus in ways they would not in a more general account, and it is Bledsoe's deep knowledge of Chorley and *his* world that makes the whole gel together. The chapter also contains psychological analyses of Dickens's responses to three operas which moved him particularly deeply: Meyerbeer's *Le Prophète* (1849), Berlioz's revision of Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice* (1762) as *Orphée* (1859) and *Faust*. (The fact that all three works emerged from Paris obviously says something about the cultural currents of the time.) Bledsoe (sometimes following earlier critics) suggests that in each case, and especially the latter two, Dickens glimpsed very personal resonances in the opera and identified deeply with the emotional situations represented. The fourth chapter is followed by an "Epilogue" which extends the personal element in the last chapter to the point at which the

main protagonists of Bledsoe's narrative, Dickens, Chorley, the Lehmanns and Viardot, have all died. It is very moving, not least because Bledsoe clearly cares intensely about these people, and yet this material has little to do with the earlier part of the book, as the author himself admits:

The personal relations for the most part tell us nothing about specific musical articles in his [Dickens's] journals. Nor do they speak to Dickens's ongoing interest in music that is good for the public. It seems reasonable, however, to believe that these ongoing contacts partly explain why Dickens, editor and conductor, chose to publish more articles about classical music and opera in *All The Year Round* than in *Household Words*. (186)

Bledsoe's book is very well organised, his long chapters divided into plentiful short sections, all with their own titles, thus giving the whole something of the air of an encyclopaedia and making it easy to locate information on any particular topic. On the other hand, as just hinted, it has certain structural weaknesses. The ideal reader is clearly someone with a strong interest in both Dickens and nineteenth-century British musical culture. Perhaps not too many people share those interests; but the problem is not so much that Bledsoe believes that they do, as that he seems to have decided that they don't, and that his study should be thus pitched to one camp or the other. As the title suggests, he has chosen to pitch it to Dickensians, and he tries to keep Dickens in focus as much as possible: the fourth chapter and "Epilogue" seem designed, in part, to leave the reader with the feeling that the book is more about Dickens than had seemed the case in the earlier chapters. In those earlier chapters Bledsoe can only keep Dickens in the picture by treating the essays discussed there in a very summary and business-like manner. The overall result, in my judgement, falls a little between two stools: readers expecting a book primarily about Dickens will feel slightly shortchanged, and readers hoping for a book primarily about the journalistic treatment of music in nineteenth-century Britain more so. There are, for example, only little, incidental dips into other musical journalism of the period, so the reader is frequently left unsure whether *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* represent typically British positions or whether they had something unique to say about music. Moreover, the present book is not even a full account of Dickens's role as an editor who saw musical journalism cross his desk. As a note acknowledges (197, n. 2), he had also served as an editor of *Bentley's Miscellany* and the *Daily News*, both of which published material on musical topics, and it is a pity Bledsoe did not choose to discuss

Bentley's at least, for no one else is likely to work through it with his scholarly diligence and comprehensive knowledge of music in the period.

In conclusion, though, *Dickens, Journalism, Music: "Household Words" and "All The Year Round"* exactly describes the book. Any Dickensian wanting to know what *Household Words* and *All The Year Round* had to say on and around the subject of music in the mid-nineteenth century will find a treasure trove of information and informed commentary. Bledsoe's scholarship is of a very high standard and his writing consistently engaging and jargon-free.