



*Eighteenth-Century Music* © Cambridge University Press, 2013  
doi:10.1017/S1478570613000110

PHILIP OLLESON

*THE JOURNALS AND LETTERS OF SUSAN BURNEY: MUSIC AND SOCIETY IN LATE EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY ENGLAND*

Farnham: Ashgate, 2012

pp. xxi + 334, ISBN 978 0 7546 5592 3

Susan (Susanna Elizabeth) Burney, who in her short life wrote many hundreds of pages in the form of journals and letters, deserves to be better known: as Philip Olleson puts it in his General Introduction, these constitute ‘one of the largest and most significant’ such collections extant (1). His work on her behalf in making this carefully selected and scrupulously edited volume of her writings is greatly to be welcomed by musicologists and historians (and indeed the general reader) with an interest in eighteenth-century English society and culture. The edition, produced to a high standard by Ashgate, makes a substantial contribution to the scholarly literature on the Burneys. Besides the journal entries that form the main contents (63–308), among the many strengths of the volume are a variety of helpful and informative items supplementing the main text, including a family tree and an extensive index (313–334). The most substantial of these added items is Olleson’s biographical introduction (5–60), in which he draws on a variety of sources to round out his account of Susan Burney’s life. He quotes, for instance, as appropriate from the *Journals and Letters of Fanny Burney (Madame D’Arblay), 1791–1840* (ed. Joyce Hemlow and others, twelve volumes (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972–1984)), which provide material complementary to his selection from the journals of her sister Susan.

Unlike her older sister Fanny (who was in her lifetime a published author), Susan was apparently not considered to merit an entry in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, but simply receives a brief mention in the entry for her father, the celebrated writer and musician Charles Burney. Olleson’s edition of her journals reveals Susan as a writer possessing considerable talent; indeed, her lively style and wit, eye for detail and ear for dialogue suggest that she might (had she wished) perhaps have had some success as a novelist: her account of day-to-day happenings often has the quality of scenes from a drama or novella. She tended to be self-deprecating about her writing, although this could be at least partly a consciously applied literary device, as when in a letter of March 1787 she compared herself to Fanny: ‘I have done nothing but play with my Children, & work for them, and with a little reading & making Music my time has always been compleatly filled up tho’ to recount in what manner w<sup>d</sup> not be very entertaining, unless you were the *Describer*’ (193).

Susan also emerges from these journals (which were couched in the form of letters to her family, mostly to her beloved Fanny) as an astute critic in matters of musical composition and performance, in connection with her reportage on her visits to the opera and attendance at concerts. She also regularly attended art exhibitions at the Royal Academy and elsewhere, recounting what she saw (often in quite exhaustive detail). In this sphere she had doubts and anxieties about her own critical judgement, though she had her ‘vanity sweetly gratified’ when she found her responses confirmed by others (225). The value of her writings is manifold, giving a vivid picture of family life and society in her milieu, chronicling political events (most notably the terrifyingly violent anti-Catholic Gordon riots of 1780) and social occasions (including her visit to Fanny at the royal court), as well as reporting in detail on performers and repertoire, providing much insight thereby into operatic and concert culture generally in late eighteenth-century London. Her journal letters convey the intensity with which an intelligent and sensitive woman might enjoy family life at that time. This applies both to her earlier life within the close-knit Burney family circle (together with their wide circle of acquaintances) and, following her marriage to the naval captain Molesworth Phillips, to her experience of motherhood: her intense love and pride where her children were concerned shine from the pages of her journals, as does her concern to guide and prepare them for their own experiences in life. ‘It is always my care’, she wrote in April 1789 apropos of her then three-year-old son Norbury, ‘to present



School to him not only as a *necessity*, but as a *pleasant* thing as much as possible – Poor little boys had need be *prepossessed* in its favour I think, & it is a cruelty not to endeavour as much as we can to lessen the repugnance w<sup>ch</sup> such a change from a happy life at home, cannot fail of creating’ (220).

Sadly, as Olleson observes, this was to become a marriage ‘in decline’, with the turning-point occurring when Phillips (his behaviour becoming increasingly unpredictable and unkind) moved his family to rural Ireland, where he possessed property. Olleson draws attention to the poignant letters from this later period, in which Susan encoded her references to Phillips in terms of a report on the weather. Her health also sadly in decline, she made the journey back from Ireland in December 1799 (‘Oh my beloved father’, she wrote to Charles Burney, ‘once more I tread on English Ground, once more I breathe the blessed air you breathe – I am greatly fatigued by an uncommonly long passage which yet I have borne better than I c<sup>d</sup> have expected’; 307). She died the following month, aged just 45.

Susan’s earlier narratives are richly peopled with artistic, literary and musical figures, many of whom were frequent visitors to the Burney household or hosted the Burneys in their own homes. In the earlier phases of her marriage, too, she continued to meet socially many of the leading performers of the time, as well as attending their performances: Salomon was among this company, but, as Olleson notes, we do not know whether she ever met Haydn. She had a gift for conveying a character in a brief pen portrait, as when she encountered ‘Sig<sup>r</sup> Tonioli, a poor Italian Poet’ at the house of the singer Appolonia Marchetti (for whom he had ‘written a scene . . . to sing at her Benefit’), and summed him up in a few lines: ‘He plays on the Violoncello extremely well, tho’ he never performs in *Public*. He is the most Serious, Shy, reserved Italian I ever saw . . . he looked so lank & so *triste* every time he caught my eye . . . He is sensible & well read, as I found in the course of the Evening’ (during which he addressed her entirely in French; 167).

A particular favourite (and frequent visitor) was the castrato Pacchierotti, who seems to have become a benchmark for Susan, and with whom she would compare other singers: she repeatedly describes him as singing ‘like an angel’, but beyond this standard epithet her critical comments on his performances are nuanced and well informed, and her delight in his company manifest. She responded with even greater enthusiasm than usual to his performance in Sacchini’s opera *Rinaldo*, which she attended ‘notwithstanding *unwellness*’ in April 1780: ‘How was I delighted when Rinaldo appear’d, surrounded by dancing Nymphs, with the sweetest accomp<sup>d</sup> Rec<sup>e</sup> imaginable . . . indeed every passion, every line of the Opera is beautifully set, & w<sup>th</sup> infinite expression & feeling by Sacchini, & Pacchierotti not only in his *Airs*, but in every word of the recitative delights me – so much *Sense* – so much *sensibility* . . . such affecting Expression does he give to every thing!’ (149–150).

Besides the public performances (and semi-public rehearsals) that she attended regularly, Susan refers often to private music-making in a domestic setting. Another much admired performer whose name recurs frequently in her descriptions of these occasions was the violinist Scheener. Her response to his playing (‘far more exquisitely than . . . I have ever heard him’) at an evening party chez Charles Burney in Titchfield Street, in April 1789, echoed her earlier comments on Pacchierotti, and indeed she was moved to invoke the latter on this occasion also: ‘When I have heard him [Scheener] in these very select parties I think he has exceeded in touching & exquisite expression every instrumental Performer I have *ever heard* – & *save Pacchierotti*, I c<sup>d</sup> almost add every vocal performer too . . . He seems *indeed* to possess, to borrow the words of my dear Father “that superior power of expressing almost all that a human *voice* can produce, except the articulation of the words”’ (224).

At some of these sociable evening gatherings she herself was prevailed upon (in spite of her reluctance) to participate as a keyboard player in chamber music, sometimes alongside the professionals, as happened for instance at the home of the Fitzgeralds (friends of Susan and Captain Phillips) just the evening before the Titchfield Street party. Susan relates how Scheener, performing on that occasion also, was disadvantaged by the evidently inadequate accompaniments provided by some of the other guests, and she continues with an account of her own role in the proceedings: ‘I was afterwards, I am very sorry to relate, persecuted into attempting a lesson – & w<sup>th</sup> my usual ill luck on such occasions was compelled to play one in w<sup>ch</sup> I was wholly out of practice – there being no Sets of Pleyells, or Haydn or Schroeters that I



knew – I played in consequence additionally ill & sh<sup>d</sup> have been very angry w<sup>th</sup> myself for having made the attempt had it been in my power to avoid it – Scheener however tried to comfort me by saying he had not been so well accomp<sup>d</sup> all the eve<sup>g</sup> as in my slow movement & other flattering things’ (223).

Olleson supplies a generous quantity of footnotes, which give source information and identify institutions, personages, repertoire and events mentioned in the text, adding contextual detail where appropriate. For the phrases in foreign languages (mostly French) scattered through Susan’s narratives Olleson generally provides English translations within the text. It would be possible to suggest additional features that could have been included: perhaps one side of the running heads (which on both sides of the double spread read simply ‘The Journals and Letters of Susan Burney’) could have given the date of the letter concerned, since to find this may otherwise necessitate turning back many pages. A timeline of Susan’s life together with reference to other family members could have been a useful supplement to, on the one hand, the broad outline given by the chapter titles (such as ‘Mickleham and London, May 1787–July 1794’) and, on the other hand, the long and discursive biographical introduction. But as it stands, the volume is so replete with valuable information, and altogether so thoughtfully conceived and enjoyable to read, that it does ample justice to Susan Burney’s writings. It is surely destined to serve as an important reference source in its field.

SUSAN WOLLENBERG

<susan.wollenberg@music.ox.ac.uk>



## EDITIONS

*Eighteenth-Century Music* © Cambridge University Press, 2013  
doi:10.1017/S1478570613000122

SIGRID RIEUWERTS, ED.

*THE BALLAD REPERTOIRE OF ANNA GORDON, MRS BROWN OF FALKLAND*

Woodbridge: Boydell, 2011

pp. xiii + 339, ISBN 978 1 89797 632 6

The ballad repertoire of Anna Gordon, later Mrs Brown of Falkland, has interested intellectuals, folklorists and music collectors since before 1783. This was approximately the date at which a scholar and enthusiast for Scottish music, William Tytler of Woodhouselee, requested of Anna Gordon’s father, professor Thomas Gordon, that the ballads she had learned as a child be written down for him. Tytler wanted to establish a continuous Scottish musical tradition independent of Italian or English influences, and the old ballads were an important link in his argument. In the years that followed, Anna Gordon – by now Mrs Anna Brown – was appealed to several more times by antiquarians interested in the old songs, and she and her husband wrote out many more of the ballads she had stored in her memory.

The multiple – and overlapping – records of Anna Brown’s repertoire, together with some surviving correspondence about how and when she learned her ballads, and her claimed ignorance of the texts in other collections, have intrigued ballad scholars for the last two hundred years. Because of the differences among records of the same ballads, taken down at intervals of seventeen years or more, scholars interested in oral traditions have used these texts to speculate upon memory, oral transmission and the so-called oral-formulaic method of reconstituting a ballad each time it is performed. The terms of this theory were developed by Milman Parry and his student Albert Lord in relation to the epic ballad singers of Yugoslavia and used more recently by David Buchan to explain the variations in Mrs Brown’s ballad renditions (Albert B. Lord, *Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1960); David Buchan, *The Ballad and the Folk* (London: Routledge, 1972)).