

The Canterbury Catch Club – a performance of class

Introduction

Ladies and gentlemen, good morning, thank you for coming. I'd like to introduce you to the Canterbury Catch Club: here they are, immortalised in a splendid lithograph dating from 1826.

Footnote number 1; apologies if you already know this: in case the term “catch” is unfamiliar to you, let me explain that it's a musical genre which has been very well known to the English drinking classes – so, everyone – since at least the 16th century, if not earlier. The most famous use of the word is to be found in Shakespeare, when, in *Twelfth Night*, Act 2, Scene 3, Sir Toby Belch greets the arrival of the Fool with a cheerful “Welcome, ass. Now let's have a catch.” It is, quite simply, a round for grown-ups: as in your nursery school examples (*Frere Jacques*, to pick one mid-way between England and Italy) this consists of one continuous melody whose constituent phrases (usually 3 or 4) harmonise with each other, thanks to the repeated harmonic sequence underpinning them. This means that one singer can start and be followed by others, each beginning as successive phrases are completed, thus creating instant harmony. We think the name originated from the Italian, *caccia*, since that's a good description of what the voices do: they chase each other, round and round. Now although the harmonic basis of a catch can get a bit more sophisticated than the one chord required in *Frere Jacques*, the adult content may reside not so much in its music as in its text: mainly (though not solely) thanks to Henry Purcell, the catch has long had a reputation for salacious and offensive content: in 1795 one William Jackson described them as pieces of music which “when quartered, have three parts obscenity and one part music”.¹ This was music ideally suited to the sort of company Sir Toby Belch keeps in *Twelfth Night*. At least, that's what everybody thinks about the catch, and I don't have time to show you that that's not entirely fair. End of footnote.

By now you may be wondering why this picture shows a group of evidently civilised gentlemen listening to an orchestra – or not, as the case may be – when I'm trying to tell you that they've formed a club to sing (potentially) rude songs. If that's the case, you're thinking, why aren't they singing in this picture? I shall now compound your puzzlement: it is clear that the Canterbury Catch Club was very self-consciously

¹ William Jackson, *Letters on Various Subjects: On Catches*, 3rd edn. (London: T. Cadell, Jun. and W. Davies, 1795), p. 61-71 in <<https://archive.org/details/thirtylettersonv00jack>> [accessed 8th Feb 2016].

modelled (as were hundreds of others up and down the country) on the great-granddaddy of them all, the London Noblemen and Gentlemen's Catch Club – or the “Nobs and Gents”, as it came to be known. Founded 1762. Am I now trying to tell you, then, that it was not only this gathering of provincial gentlemen who got all dressed up to sing rude songs, but the very highest and noblest in the land?

The short answer is yes. We know they did because lots of people tell us so: Charles Dickens wrote a wonderful description of a thoroughly chaotic “harmonic meeting” in one of his *Sketches by Boz*, and we'll hear from William Makepiece Thackeray in a moment. We also have two great musical diarists: John Marsh lived in Canterbury for a few years in the 1780s and wrote about this very club, and his London contemporary Richard John Samuel Stevens, poor sensitive chap, described the songs sung at the London Je Ne Sais Quoi Club at about the same period as “very disgusting, disgraceful, and horrible to hear.”² And by the way, the Prince of Wales – the future King George IV – was right in there with that crowd. So, yes: everybody was at it, as Thackeray pointed out, years later: “You may fancy all England sounding with choruses, some ribald, some harmless, but all occasioning the consumption of a prodigious deal of fermented liquor.”³

So how do we resolve the apparent disjunction between outward respectability and tainted reputation? In short, can we trust this picture?

We can be certain of its provenance: date, artist, publisher and printer are given, and other records corroborate that information. Slightly mysteriously, it has, for some time, been accompanied by a hand-drawn sketch with typewritten names identifying 42 of the 120 figures in the picture [\[click\]](#). I'm afraid the provenance of this piece of evidence is completely unknown, but much of the information is corroborated by the Club's own records, by the Electoral Roll for 1826, [\[click\]](#) (this shows you who was qualified to vote) and by a city "Directory" of just 12 years later, 1838 [\[click\]](#). It seems reasonable, then, to accept this strange document as good evidence. [\[click, to return to just the print...\]](#)

² Argent, M. (ed.), *Recollections of R.J.S. Stevens; An Organist in Georgian London* (USI, Carbondale, 1992), p. 75.

³ Thackeray, W.M., *The Four Georges*, Vol 23 of *The Works...* (Smith, Elder & Co., Waterloo Place, London, 1899) p. 96.

And there are other records of the Canterbury Catch Club: committee Minutes Books, concert records, accounts, various artefacts including portraits, and an astonishing archive of music (hundreds of volumes, thousands of pieces) give us a lot of evidence with which to scrutinise this print.

So we know that the club really did exist from 1779 to 1865, and organised weekly concerts throughout the winter months - 30 of them each season; we know many of the members; and the room shown here, in which they met in the years 1779-1833, still survives in the city. So do the portraits – a sizeable collection, including these two of St Cecilia and Corelli but also including one of Handel AND several more of members of the Club. Yes: club members had their portraits painted. Two of them [\[click\]](#) are on permanent display in the city library. That lovely lady in the foreground is my wife Sonia, brightening up the presentation considerably and helpfully giving a sense of scale to make clear that these were fairly serious paintings. The lower painting, [\[click\]](#) of the mild-mannered-looking gentleman with a violin, is a portrait of the musical director of the Club – yes, they were that serious about it – one Thomas Goodban. The other painting, [\[click\]](#) immediately next to Sonia, is that picture of Saint Cecilia, patron saint of music – and of the Canterbury Catch Club – seated at a keyboard instrument, with a couple of cherubs and a verse from Dryden hovering over her head, in a non-too-subtle invocation of classical models. What fine paintings!

So this image [\[click\]](#) is carefully constructed to give every semblance of a gathering of sophisticated, culturally literate gentlemen enjoying a concert provided by professional musicians in convivial surroundings. The orchestra in the background – twenty-five players jammed indistinctly into the alcove at the back of the room – testifies to the prosperity of a club which could afford to hire a sizeable ensemble for its weekly entertainment and then, if this image is anything to go by, largely ignore it. And we might note that most of the members seem extraordinarily pleased with themselves as they neglect whatever music is being so earnestly played: they chat; they gaze at the fire or into the middle distance; they exchange snuff; or they drink, puffing at their pipes all the while.

But, with our suspicions aroused by the reputation of this music-making, we might use the Club's own records – along with others, some already mentioned – to interrogate this print. And when we do, our suspicions grow. The Club records show that the atmosphere would have been thick with the smoke from all those pipes – the air pumps' dismal failure to clear the smog was a recurrent concern for about eighty

years. Then there was the orchestra: local musicians accorded no more respect than musicians generally in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, they were a perpetual irritation to the committee of local worthies running the Club. Women, we find, formed part of the audience and – quite exceptionally – were frequently heard performing (as singers, and better paid than the men) in this provincial gathering. In fact, vocal music actually comprised the larger part of the evening's formal concert, as we shall see. Meanwhile, there's absolutely no clue here to the informal, ribald, post-concert communal singing of catches which we know went on after the concert until the early hours of the following morning.

Moreover, the music we *do* know about isn't exactly flattering. Thanks to the records, we know exactly what the club members heard in the 1825-1826 concert season. Here [\[click\]](#) is the programme for the first of the season's concerts, transcribed from those records – here's the first page [\[click\]](#). It's a typical programme; the other 360+ records for the next 12 years detail a fairly substantial semi-formal concert each Wednesday evening. Note that most of this programme is vocal music: solo songs, glees, a duet, and the National Anthem heavily outnumber the four instrumental items.

Footnote no. 2: the English glee, you should know, is an altogether more serious piece of music than its disreputable cousin, the catch: descendant of the madrigal and progenitor of the English part-song, it is an unaccompanied secular piece intended for three, four or five (very occasionally more) solo voices, the top voice usually being the distinctive, male, counter-tenor. This is one of the things which clearly suggests a strong connection with English cathedral music, and it's clear from Canterbury Cathedral records that most of the orchestral players in the Catch Club were lay clerks (gentlemen singers) in the cathedral choir. Note that the glee was not usually a piece intended for alcohol-fuelled participation; it expected an audience, and its subject-matter could be very serious indeed. Lots of songs about death, love, patriotism, setting some fine poetry. Though quite a few are about drinking. End of footnote.

It's instructive to scrutinise [\[click\]](#) the composers at the top of the Canterbury Catch Club hit parade in 1825-6, judging by the number of pieces played that season. Note the pre-eminence of Henry Bishop. His popularity far outstrips that of his two nearest rivals – the foremost glee composers of their day – John Wall Callcott and Samuel Webbe in the taste of the Canterbury Catch Club. Clearly, this is a composer to whom we should pay some attention.

I won't take any time passing on readily available information about Bishop, who was, basically, the Andrew Lloyd Webber of his day. My contribution is what you're about to hear: a fine example of his output. The glee *Mynheer Van Dunk* was performed no fewer than SIX times in the 1825-6 season. It's the opening chorus in George Colman's play-with-music-by-Bishop, *The Law of Java*. The play is rubbish, and you probably won't think much more highly of its music, but there is no denying Bishop's understanding of theatrical imperatives: as the curtain opens on the Dutch soldiers, dismally consigned to their faraway outpost of colonial rule, thumping out their faux-traditional drinking song at the start of the show, things get off to a rollicking start.⁴ With its simple, two-verse, solo-chorus structure, its infuriatingly infectious iambic tetrameters (te-TUM-te-TUM-tiddle-IDdle-iddle-UM), and its lamentable doggerel – not to mention the pandering to the racial stereotype of the drunken Dutchman – this piece was guaranteed to be a sure-fire hit. More to the point, for a Catch Club audience it offered a tremendous opportunity (in the chorus) to join in: demanding much enthusiasm and very little sensitivity, its appeal to the drinking classes is clear. Here it is, specially recorded for this Conference by the Lay Clerks of Canterbury Cathedral: the world premiere of this recording. We're making history, if nothing else.

[Slide!!!!]

Just think what else you could have been doing with that 3 minutes 10 seconds of your life...

A brief word about the instrumental music in the Catch Club programmes. It has much the same character. Consider this: by far the most popular orchestral item is the overture: 83 of them comprehensively outnumber the other 12 orchestral pieces played that season. With *Mynheer Van Dunk* firmly stuck in our heads, it is tempting to draw a parallel. The rhetoric of the overture is distinctive: it entices, it anticipates, it cajoles the audience, by heraldry, by drama, by extravagant gesture. This makes it perfect for a convivial concert such as the Catch Club's, which is really not at all interested in a level of musical engagement deeper than the beer in their glasses. In short, none of this is what you might call very highbrow music.

⁴ The source is the Catch Club archive copy, in Volume 40, p. 75, but it is easily obtainable at the BL.

But then, they weren't a very highbrow group. One last piece of evidence with which to interrogate the print: Canterbury did not have the aristocratic nobility of London; the Electoral Roll makes that clear. Only 22 of the 42 named members qualified – by owning property – for the vote.

One way and another, the various pieces of evidence seem to put a bit of a dent in the veneer of social sophistication this gathering is working so hard to depict. But after all that, perhaps the worst that might be said of this image is that it's economical with the truth – like all advertisements. This is hardly surprising. As Zdravko said in his keynote remarks on Tuesday evening, self-representation is a form of promotion, so you don't want to publicise the smokiness of your room or the pay disputes with your musicians, who were, in any case, a typically disreputable lot. And you don't need me to talk about the position of women in British society at this time – nor do I feel qualified. But, presented with such a self-conscious portrait, we still have to ask: why might these worthy citizens feel any need to advertise themselves at all? Especially in such an idealised manner? Why the trappings of portraiture, statuary, enscrolled motto, and chandelier? Are all those high collars, pipes, glasses and top hats absolutely necessary? And – given the primacy of vocal music in the concert records and the surviving music archive – why not include the singers? In short, why is the Catch Club membership putting on its best behaviour?

Charles Dickens offers a clue. In one of those *Sketches by Boz* he muses upon the sad disappearance of May Day traditions such as dancing round a Maypole (ask me later if you don't understand this bit). “Well; many years ago,” he says, “we began to be a steady and matter-of-fact sort of people, and dancing in spring being beneath our dignity we gave it up...”⁵ The Catch Club was an institution born of the 18th century - the Georgian period of English history - and as the historian Vic Gatrell points out, Georgian manners, tastes and behaviour happily embraced the lewd and lascivious at all levels of society.⁶ For Gatrell, as for Dickens, the 19th century brought about a seismic shift in manners and outward morals which reflected the intellectual developments in science and technology, in secular scholarship, and in the arguments for political and social reform. The consequent doubt as to the continuity of the old order encouraged, in the middle classes, a rush to respectability in which bourgeois identity was “affirmed and remoralised”. This all meant that being middle-class was a perilous existence. As John Rule and Susie Steinbach have pointed out,

⁵ Ibid., p. 157

⁶ Ibid., p. 17

in a low-level commercial world which depended on a network of credit, the threat of imprisonment for debt was ever-present. Appearances mattered, and Catch Club membership was visible evidence which validated a social position. Remember how Antonio described the socio-political function of the *Club zur Geduld*, drawing on Judith Butler's thinking about performative space: to provide a safe place in which the self-selecting membership could rehearse and perform their social status with a greater sense of security. Remember Maria's points about the importance of being seen – appropriately dressed and behaving decorously, as befitted the social status to which you aspired – at the opera in 19th-century Spain. Here, too, in this print, we see an affirmation of an emerging social and political identity. It was a hard-fought battle: we can see the tension in the Club committee's treatment of the Orchestra, who were, as far as the committee were concerned, merely paid artisans of a lower social class: throughout the Minutes Books, the committee has to grapple with thorny questions such as where the players might sit so they could watch when not performing (answer: at an unwanted table by the door of the Ladies' Room⁷), whether they should applaud other performers from their positions in the orchestra (no, they shouldn't⁸), or whether a member of the Orchestra should be allowed to be a member of the Club (again, no⁹). During the Orchestra Mutiny of 1843 – they actually refused to play – one newspaper correspondent contemptuously reminded the players that they were only worth what anyone was prepared to pay them: when funds are low, "they must, of course, receive a smaller remuneration for their services," he said.¹⁰

With all that in mind, it becomes clear that the performance at the back of the room in this print is not the most important one. The real performers are front and centre, as intended: a nascent middle class membership anxious to present a serious club both to themselves and to the outside world. Remember, they had their portraits painted: no expense was spared in strengthening that tenuous grip on social respectability. It's more than self-promotion: with political reform in the air, this print is a propaganda poster in the class war, every bit as manipulative in its intent as any carefully posed royal portrait [\[click\]](#) up to and including the present day. Here, with all the trappings of nineteenth-century culture clearly on display in this print, ladies and gentlemen, I submit that we are looking at the Canterbury Catch Club giving a masterclass in the performance of class. Thank you for your kind attention.

⁷ Catch Club Minutes, Nov 15, 1841

⁸ Ibid., Feb 8, 1841

⁹ Ibid., Sept. 17, 1833

¹⁰ *The Kentish Gazette*, 24 October 1843