

Giulio Regondi at Oxford

SUSAN WOLLENBERG

In Fall 2005, Allan Atlas approached me with a gleam in his eye (discerned at some distance—in fact, via e-mail) with a request that I write a short piece on 'Regondi at Oxford'. To aid me in this, he supplied an extensive bibliography of Regondi—but, he added, 'none of these items mentions Regondi at Oxford'. As I had mentioned the subject myself in a recent publication,¹ I was evidently deemed a suitable candidate for the task. What follows constitutes, of course, merely a footnote to history, but I hope not an uninteresting one. It is in that spirit that I offer it.²

I have, then, previously (though all too briefly) documented Regondi at Oxford in the 1850s, and a more detailed consideration of this activity will form the nub of the discussion here. It might reasonably seem that the fashion for the concertina in Oxford was synonymous with Regondi's appearances in the city. As so often happens, however, upon further investigation a precedent becomes apparent. In March 1843 a local newspaper advertisement announced Mr John P. Barratt's 'Grand Vocal and Instrumental Concert', scheduled to take place on Tuesday, 21 March, in the Town Hall, Oxford, 'for which he has been fortunate enough to procure the assistance of the following Artistes': it then lists among the 'vocalists' Mr [John] Braham (in first place), and heading the instrumentalists 'Herr Koenig (cornet à pistons)', followed by 'Mr Julian Adams (Concertina)'.³

John Braham was clearly the principal attraction on this occasion. The *Journal* subsequently noted that a 'numerous audience' had assembled early to witness the return of 'the veteran Braham'.⁴ The critic was enthusiastic in praise of the performances, both vocal and instrumental: 'Of the instrumental performers, we cannot but speak in very high terms. . .'; the violin solo, he reported, was exquisite, 'and so were Koenig's on the cornet à pistons and Julian Adams's on that admired instrument the concertina'.⁵

This early sighting of the concertina as a recital instrument in Oxford is, as far as I am aware, the only such occurrence before the 1850s and the arrival of Regondi on the scene. It would seem that the inclusion of the concertina in a list of the multifarious musical instruments owned (or hired) and practised by members of the university, published in 1856, reflects primarily the influence of Regondi's performances in Oxford.⁶ It is also, of course, possible that Regondi was invited to perform in Oxford in the first instance as a result of an already growing interest in the concertina locally. However, other factors enter into the question, and before surveying his Oxford concerts, a glance at the nature of concert life in the city will be in order here.

It is only relatively recently that the focus in studies of music in England from the eighteenth century onwards has shifted significantly away from a London-centred approach, towards the provinces. Oxford is a special case, as a leading university city—one of the most ancient in the kingdom—

with a long and notable musical tradition, marked in that period by the distinction of having hosted the visits of Handel and Haydn, in 1733 and 1791, respectively. Important as they are, these two high points in Oxford's musical life, copiously documented in the primary sources and the secondary literature, could all too easily obscure the continuity and extent of music's cultivation in Oxford throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and beyond.

Another possibly distorting effect arises from the way in which the story has been told. It is to the work of the Revd John H. Mee, himself something of a legend in Oxford, that we owe the establishing of Oxford's concert life as a topic of historical record, and the creation of the legendary reputation attached to the Holywell Music Room (opened 1748) as the first purpose-built concert hall in Europe.⁷ As I have observed elsewhere, Mee 'constructed his Holywell history distinctly in terms of past glories and their coming to an end'.⁸ His two concluding chapters are entitled 'Suspension of the Concerts' and 'The End of the Music Room':

The third period in the history of the Music Room is a gloomy one ... at last the enterprise, so vigorously started in 1748, and so sturdily maintained even during the greatest political and military struggle that ever engaged the energies of the English nation, comes to an inglorious end in 1840.

And his agenda at this point was clearly set out: 'Our immediate task is to trace the progress of decay'.⁹

The demise of the celebrated subscription concerts run by the Musical Society at the Holywell for the remarkable period of nearly one hundred years in fact marked the beginning of a new phase in Oxford concert life from the 1840s onwards. The Musical Society, governed by a Committee, and almost exclusively using the Holywell Music Room as its concert venue, was now replaced by a number of individual entrepreneurs putting on performances in a variety of locations. This change gave a boost to the city's concert life, and brought Giulio Regondi to Oxford in the mid-century.¹⁰ The stewards of the Musical Society had been keen 'talent-spotters', booking the leading performers from London and abroad to appear as guest soloists in Oxford. Their successors as concert organizers in the city continued to be energetic in this regard. During the 1840s, invited soloists included Jenny Lind, Clara Novello, John Braham, Sigismund Thalberg, Madame Louise Dulcken ('Pianist to the Queen'),¹¹ Camillo Sivori (violin), and the Messrs Distin on 'sax horns'.

Among those who launched their own concert series at this time were members of the Marshall family, a local musical dynasty. William Marshall senior had been leader of the Holywell Band, the resident orchestra for the subscription concerts, for more than forty years beginning in 1801. His sons William and Edward appeared regularly in concerts in the middle decades of the century, performing on violin and flute, respectively. The family collectively took a prominent role in Oxford's musical life for at least half a century. William Marshall junior had made his Oxford debut on the violin, playing a duo with his father in 1815 at the age of about nine; he was

also a singer, organist, and pianist, and was appointed Organist of Christ Church, Oxford (and simultaneously of St John's College), in 1825, a post he held until 1846.¹²

Perhaps through the Marshall family's London connections (William junior had trained as a chorister at the Chapel Royal), Regondi seems to have been adopted into their musical circle in Oxford, contributing to a number of their concerts in the early 1850s. (Another possibility is that members of Regondi's own London network provided an introduction for him to Oxford's concert platforms.) Even more inviting is the notion that members of the Marshall family were themselves concertinists, as the Wheatstone sales ledger C1046 records a transaction for a Mr W.P. Marshall on 12 May 1842 and another for a Mr. E. Marshall on 21 November 1840.¹³ In any event, Regondi's first appearance in Oxford can be documented as having taken place in one of Edward Marshall's concerts, held at the Star Assembly Room on 22 April 1850.¹⁴ The list of performers (advertised as 'the following eminent Professors') was headed, as was customary, by the vocalists, namely Mrs Alban Croft ('late mezzo-soprano of the Royal English Opera, Drury Lane') and Mr Sims Reeves ('principal tenor of Her Majesty's Theatre'), with Mr Alban Croft (baritone, also late of Drury Lane) in third place. Listed among the instrumentalists, after 'Herr Ernst, (The eminent German Violinist)'—it was his first appearance in Oxford—was 'Signor Giulio Regondi (Concertina and Guitar)', followed by Mr Hamilton (pianoforte) and Mr Edward Marshall (flute). Mr Hamilton was billed as conductor on this occasion.

The concert was evidently a 'high-profile' event, with tickets advertised as on sale through a specialist agency, Russell's of High Street, as well as through the usual outlets (which included individuals' houses). There was to be a limited number of reserved seats, and patrons were advised to book early. The event was reported in the following week's issue of the *Journal* as 'well attended', but not all aspects of the evening's programme had proceeded smoothly as planned:

Previously to its commencement, however, handbills were circulated in the room, announcing that in consequence of a severe accident to Mrs. Alban Croft, that lady could not appear. . .[and so] the other performers had kindly consented to play or sing more than was specified.

Regondi, then, may perhaps have contributed more than he had bargained for. Both audience and critical reception were again enthusiastic: Sims Reeves was well received with his 'Death of Nelson', while Ernst (billed as a 'pupil of Paganini') scored a hit with his "'Carnival of Venice,'" in which he introduced several new movements', which were 'perfectly marvellous' and attracted hearty applause. 'Giulio Regondi played an exquisite solo on the concertina, and another on the guitar, in both of which he met with well-merited applause'.¹⁵

That the association between Regondi and the Marshalls continued to develop is attested by the advertisement for Marshall senior's benefit concert later that year:

Mr. Marshall, who has had the honour of leading the Concerts in the University of Oxford for the last 50 years, with great respect informs the Nobility and Gentry of the University and City, and his friends, that a Concert for his benefit will be given at the Star Assembly Rooms, on Monday the 11th of November, for which the following vocal performers are engaged:—Miss Messent, Miss Taylor [both from the Royal Academy of Music, London], Mr. Whitehouse (from the Chapel Royal, Windsor) and Mr. G. Marshall. Solo performers: Flute: Mr. E. Marshall; Concertina: Signor Giulio Regondi. ¹⁶

The leader was Mr Marshall, assisted by Mr Reinagle, Mr Sharp, and the members of the Oxford Choral Society, who had 'kindly given their services on this occasion'. The conductor was Dr Stephen Elvey, organist of New College and a respected figure in the University. Regondi was thus brought into contact with many of the leading lights on the Oxford musical scene, and they with him. The *Journal* reported that Marshall's 'friends and patrons' had rallied round him, and singled out for praise Regondi's performance: 'Signor Regondi was encored in both of his performances on the concertina, which were executed in a manner that astonished and delighted all who heard them'. The concert was judged 'extremely successful, and appeared to give much satisfaction to the large audience assembled on the occasion'.¹⁷

Regondi's Oxford appearances continued during 1851, with his contribution in December of that year to 'Mr Marshall's concert' at the '[Star] Assembly Rooms', reportedly 'attended by a highly respectable audience', and judged an 'excellent concert'. The characteristically mixed programme included, as well as some exquisite singing, various instrumental solos: 'As usual, Regondi delighted the company by his unrivalled performance on the concertina', while Mr E. Marshall was 'deservedly applauded in his fantasia on the flute'. Numerous encores were demanded, 'which were conceded most willingly'.¹⁸

Another important local entrepreneur was James Russell, of 'Mr. Russell's Music Warehouse', situated at 125 High Street and 5 Turl Street, Oxford. He too engaged an impressive series of star performers for his concerts in the 1850s, some of them shared with Marshall's concerts. Among the artists on his books was Giulio Regondi. For 'Mr. Russell's Concert' on 10 February 1859 at the Town Hall, no less than 'Madam Viardot Garcia' was among the singers, while among the instrumental performers were, on 'Concertina. Signor Giulio Regondi', and on the 'Pianoforte. Miss Arabella Goddard'.¹⁹ The critical review focused on Arabella Goddard, a frequent visitor to the city, and noted that the event was attended by 'as large an audience as we ever remember to have seen at a concert in that room'.²⁰



Giulio Regondi: 1852 lithograph by Edward Gunstone
from a daguerreotype by Martin Laroche.

Some context for Regondi's performances at these concerts is given first by the *Journal's* notices of items for sale: thus the issue of 26 November 1853 contained an advertisement offering readers, at the head of a list of items, 'CONCERTINAS. 7s. 6d. to 18s.' as well as 'best French accordions' at 5s. (8-key) and 7s. (10-key), to be had from the 'Civet Cat and Scented Soap Works', a general and rather fashionable emporium in the Corn Market, Oxford. Secondly, a reminder that this was a city populated by a relatively large proportion of young people, with attendant problems of decorum, is provided by the notice in the *Journal* of 21 November 1857, issued the day after a performance featuring mimicry and song had been given by the 'sisters Sophia and Annie':

Owing to the disgraceful behaviour of several gentlemen [of the University] at the entertainment at the Star Hotel on Monday evening, the Sisters Sophia and Annie decline appearing again in Oxford.

This was clearly a rather lowbrow entertainment, viewed as an occasion for riotous behaviour, but in the years that followed there were reports of undergraduates' 'bad manners' keeping 'most ladies away' from the more serious classical concerts. I have, however, found no evidence to suggest that Regondi's performances were received other than appreciatively and with the utmost courtesy on the part of his Oxford audiences.

As well as chronicling the Oxford element in Regondi's concert career, a facet of his life previously undocumented in the published literature, these snapshots of Oxford concerts in the nineteenth century give much insight into the concert-going customs and expectations of the period. Regondi's art as performer on the concertina evidently responded to those conditions with repeated successes, forming a reputation for him in Oxford, as indeed elsewhere, of being 'unrivalled' in his field.

NOTES

1. In my book *Music at Oxford in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 171.

2. I am grateful to Allan Atlas for stimulating my further enquiry into this topic, and to the staff of the Bodleian Library, Oxford (Modern Papers), and the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies for facilitating my access to source material.

3. *Jackson's Oxford Journal* (JOJ: hereafter referred to in the text as 'the *Journal*'), 11 March 1843. Allan Atlas notes (in a personal communication) that the Wheatstone sales ledgers record several entries for a Mr Adams, one of whom has a first initial J. (he purchased a 48-button instrument on 4 May 1841); Horniman Museum, London, Wayne Archive, C104a, 22; the ledgers are online at www.horniman.info.

4. JOJ, 25 March 1843.

5. JOJ, 25 March 1843.

6. See Peter Maurice, *What shall we do with Music? A Letter* (London: published for the author, 1856), 4 and 22 (documenting, in the colleges, 125 pianofortes,

10 harmoniums, 30 flutes, 20 violins and other strings, 30 concertinas and accordions, 18 cornets, and more 'instruments in great variety').

7. See John Henry Mee, *The Oldest Music Room in Europe: a Record of Eighteenth-Century Enterprise at Oxford* (London and New York: John Lane, 1911).

8. Susan Wollenberg, "'So much rational and elegant amusement, at an expence comparatively inconsiderable": the Holywell Concerts in the Eighteenth Century', in Susan Wollenberg and Simon McVeigh, eds., *Concert Life in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), ch. 12, 247.

9. Mee, *Music Room*, 175.

10. At the same time as the growth of individual entrepreneurship, a plethora of new organizations formed, with both university-wide and college-based musical societies flourishing in increasing numbers as the university and its colleges expanded during the nineteenth century.

11. We might note that Madame Dulcken was among Giulio Regondi's accompanists, and that her niece Isabelle (b. 1836) was herself a virtuoso concertinist; see Allan W. Atlas, *The Wheatstone English Concertina in Victorian England* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 43, and 'Ladies in the Wheatstone Ledgers: The Gendered Concertina in Victorian England, 1835-1870', forthcoming in the *Royal Musical Association Research Chronicle*, 39 (2006); see also, Helmut C. Jacobs, *Der junge Gitarren- und Concertinavirtuose Giulio Regondi: Eine kritische Dokumentation seiner Konzertreise durch Europa 1840 und 1841. Texte zur Geschichte und Gegenwart des Akkordeons*, 7 (Bochum: Augemus, 2001), 94, 252.

12. Further on the Marshall family see Mee, *Music Room*, 184-86; and H. Watkins Shaw, *The Succession of Organists of the Chapel Royal and the Cathedrals of England and Wales from c. 1538* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 214.

13. The notices appear on pages 13 and 6, respectively; communication from Allan Atlas.

14. *JOJ*, 20 April 1850. The Star was a local coaching inn, known under that name as early as 1469; after refurbishment of the building in 1783 it underwent further renovation in the early nineteenth century, with the opening of its Assembly Rooms to house public entertainments.

15. *JOJ*, 27 April 1850.

16. *JOJ*, 2 November 1850. Benefit concerts for individual musicians had been established since the mid-eighteenth century under the Musical Society's rules. It was customary for colleagues to offer their services free on these occasions.

17. *JOJ*, 9 November 1850.

18. *JOJ*, 6 December 1851. The concert took place on the previous Monday, 1 December 1851. (In general the details of the repertoire performed at such concerts are not given systematically in the local press at this period.)

19. *JOJ*, 5 February 1859. The Town Hall building, which was used increasingly for concerts in the nineteenth century, dated back to 1751; its replacement, built in 1893, still stands and is in use for civic events and concerts.

20. *JOJ*, 12 February 1859.