

A BIOGRAPHICAL DATABASE OF MUSICIANS ACTIVE PRIOR TO 1900

INTRODUCTION

Much has been written on the nature of 'traditional' music in England, but little enough is known about the lives of many specific performers. It has been obvious to me for a good number of years that the nature of the music we accept as 'traditional' is a fluid hybrid of many styles: rural and urban, grass roots and popular, military and civilian, lowbrow and highbrow. Despite the best efforts of a host of collectors and researchers over the centuries to maintain the mystique, cultural items such as music and dance never existed in a vacuum divorced from those who carried that lore. Its maintenance, performance and transmission were at the whim of factors very much dependant upon human agency and social circumstances. It seems obvious, then, that the lives of those who, for whatever reasons, made use of this musical form need to be examined in the greatest detail. This biographical database originated as a personal research tool designed to help me better understand not merely the problem itself, but the very nature of the problem.

It is not my intention here to offer an in-depth historical analysis of music and dance during the pre-1900 period. Many researchers - among them Reg Hall, Vic Gammon, Philip Heath-Coleman and Paul Roberts - have written at length about sundry aspects of these cultural forms, while I myself have contributed many hundreds of thousands of words on the subject over the past three decades. And yet, for all this published material we have barely scratched the surface of the reality. In conversation recently Reg Hall commented that I tend not to draw conclusions in my published output. To which I would reply, given the parlous state both of the availability of the primary sources and of much substantive analysis, no hard and fast conclusions can yet be drawn. A body of data may suggest conclusions, and, arguably, the larger that body the firmer the ground on which those conclusions might rest. Conversely, the increased accessibility of primary sources can just as equally invalidate earlier conclusions. Who nowadays gives serious credence to statements by Cecil Sharp, Mary Neal and their cohort that 19th century morris dance performance is rooted in pre-Christian fertility rituals? Or that the chasing and killing of a lamb at the eponymous Lamb Ale at Kirtlington, Oxfordshire, or the mock decapitation of the fool by pulling apart the 'nut' while his head is still inside during an enactment of a sword dance is a remnant of ritual human sacrifice?

I am acutely aware that I am foisting cultural and class designations upon some players which may never have existed in reality. Not all of the violin playing musicians whose biographies appear here, for example, would have thought of themselves as 'fiddle' players. Indeed, George Kendon of Croydon was evidently affronted by such a suggestion, while giving evidence in a court case in 1826 :

I am a teacher of dancing ; I never wrote any plays, but I have composed music ; I am not a fiddler, but can play the fiddle. (Laughter.) It is not my business to go round with Foy to different public-houses and fiddle for my subscription ; I am much better employed. Foy and myself went to Streatham to receive some money in the way of business. We called on a butcher who is a musical man (laughter), where we played music for some time ; it was not marrow-bones and cleavers. [The Times, 27 June 1826, page 4]

I want to stress again that the overall body of accessible data is as yet too small. The 963 musicians documented here are merely the tip of a very large iceberg. I know already of many thousands of others, and it is my intention to add further biographies as time and inclination allow. My focus here has been to document musical activity in England, and the majority of these men were born in that country. Also included are some born in Wales, where geographical activity is known to have spilled over into England, and at least one born in Scotland to English parents. It should be born in mind that anywhere a musician lighted offered potential for musical activity. One exception is when that person was incarcerated in prison, and there are numerous examples cited here.

All who appear here are male, although I am aware of quite a number of female players. Their musical activity tended in general, however, to be rather more covert than their male counterparts, who more often played in public. As a result of the haphazard manner in which I have accrued the names of musicians, the database as it stands at present contains no female performers. This I intend to rectify over time. Similarly, no Romany musicians are included here, although they were both extensively active and hugely influential across a wide swathe of England and beyond. The reason for this omission is simply this : I am in the throes of writing a book on Gypsy musicians active before 1900. 277 individual performers have been identified to date and those biographies (in the format used here) will appear with the publication of that work.

As a first foray into a broader analysis of potential musical performance over time and space I invite the reader to examine the dates of birth and death, and the geographical location of greatest possible activity, as outlined in the Index of performers. Given the caveat that my sample was accrued in no orderly fashion beyond its origin in the group of men known to have played for morris dancing in the south midlands prior to 1900, I offer the following statistics.

963 total in sample

- 321 performers with identifiable musical markers, of which there are :
 - 28 multi-instrumentalists
 - 33 pipe and tabor players
- 165 fiddle players, of which there is 1 itinerant fiddler, 10 blind fiddlers, and 1 crippled fiddler
 - 2 probable fiddlers
 - 4 dulcimer players
 - 8 harpists, one of which is blind
 - 9 concertina players, of which 1 is identified specifically as a performer on the English concertina
- 16 performers on specific instruments not listed above
- 17 non-specific travelling musicians, of which 4 are blind
 - 5 non-specific street musicians, of which 2 are blind and 1 nearly so
 - 9 non-specific blind musicians
- 15 dancing masters
 - 5 teachers of music / music master
 - 5 miscellaneous non-specific players

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