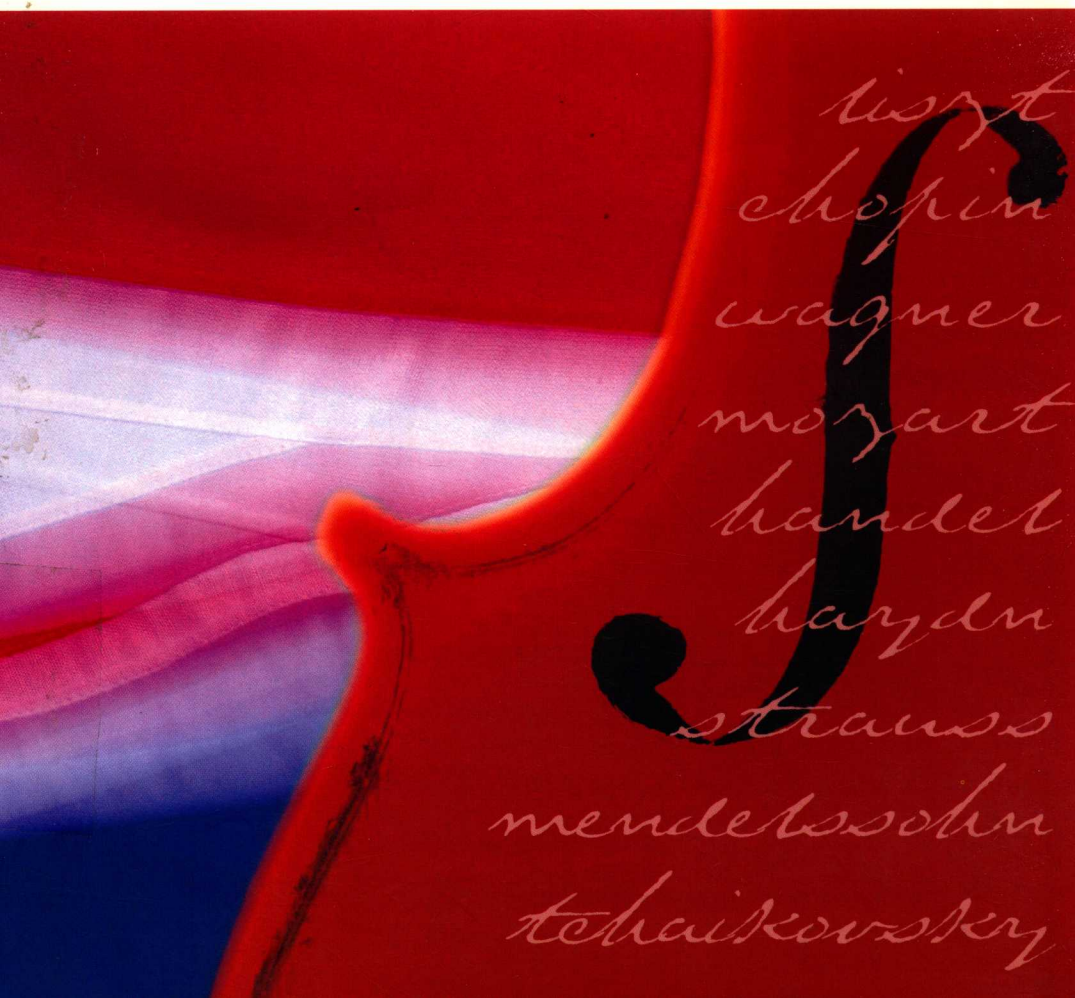
musical VISITORS TO BRITAIN

DAVID GORDON • PETER GORDON



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Musical Visitors to Britain

Over the centuries Britain has attracted many musical visitors. This book tells the stories of the many composers who visited – a varied and often eccentric collection of individuals. The earliest were invited by royalty with musical tastes; some were refugees from religious and political oppressions; others came as spies, a few to escape from debt and even murder charges. However, the main motive was a possibility of financial reward.

The rise in the nineteenth century of the celebrity composer, who was often also a conductor, is also traced. With the development of new forms of transport, composers were able to travel more extensively, both from the Continent and from the USA. New opportunities were also presented by the opening of public halls, where concerts could be held, as well as the growth of music festivals. In the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the aeroplane has enabled a regular influx of composers, and the book ends with a consideration of the universalising of music as well as the impact of new forms, such as jazz.

Musical Visitors to Britain is a fascinating book which is aimed to appeal to both the general reader and those with a special interest in music history.

David Gordon is one of the leading harpsichordists in the UK, and performs with violinists Andrew Manze, Nigel Kennedy and the baroque orchestra English Concert, specialising in improvisation. He is also a jazz pianist, and has given many workshops on aspects of Renaissance, baroque and jazz improvisation. He composes, and his output includes modern-day paraphrases of works by the seventeenth-century composers Purcell and Paisible.

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1 Frontispiece: Haydn crossing the English Channel, 1 January 1791

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Introduction

Seeking pastures new

An artist and his art tell a story, and part of that story is who he is, and where he is from. Musicians, like any other performers, are usually more fêted abroad than at home. In a profession that relies heavily on tags and trademarks, simply being foreign gives an identity to that performer. If that foreignness also represents some cultural ideal, however vague and however wrongly associated, that performer has a huge advantage over his indigenous counterparts. Similarly, there are many advantages for the musician abroad. Music, being a wordless art, travels very well. A new environment is very often stimulating for an artist, and to be heard 'with new ears' can clarify a musician's thinking. If he is successful abroad, or in reality if he merely survives there, he brings back an enhanced reputation when he returns home. Life on tour can be glamorous, and even if it is not, is often lucrative. Music performance and travel are old bedfellows.

Britain has been the magnet for foreign musicians for many centuries. Given the span of time covered, we have had of course to be selective and have chosen to concentrate on one particular category, composers, though until the later part of the eighteenth century almost all composers were also performers. Indeed, Pelham Humfrey, a leading English Restoration composer, said of the unpopular Catalan Luis Grabu, Master of the King's Music, that he 'understands nothing nor can play on any instruments and so cannot compose'.[1] Even in the 1720s, advertisements for a new Handel opera make no mention of the composer's name,[2] and Handel himself played harpsichord in all performances of his operas, just as Haydn directed his symphonies from the keyboard. From the nineteenth century, composers had become the superstars of the musical world, and Britain was an important destination for a great many of these musicians. It will become clear in what follows that there was a whole range of motives for coming to Britain.

The possibility of access to royalty, bestowing prestige on the individuals and, in some cases leading to employment in their service, was a big incentive for would-be visitors. Until 1690, when William III reorganised the musical household, the court was at the centre of musical life. Generations

of foreign musicians have sought to make their mark in England by performing for the royal family. This was especially so where there were musical monarchs. Edward I played host to some of the leading French composers of the time, while Henry VIII, who was both a composer and a performer on lute and organ, made a point of importing musicians from Venice. Not all were well received, however, and a harpsichordist, Zuan de Leze, was so disappointed with his reception that he hanged himself.[3] Mary Tudor's marriage to Philip II of Spain brought the brilliant Spaniard Antonio de Cabezón to England in 1554. Cabezón was the greatest keyboard-player of the sixteenth century, and had a profound influence on the English school of virginal composers such as Tallis, Byrd and Bull. The Italian Alfonso Ferrabosco settled in England and entered the service of Elizabeth I, whilst his son of the same name was employed by James I and Charles I. Charles also employed some of the finest French violinist–composers in his court string band, and his son Charles II, anxious to emulate the French court under Louis XIV, encouraged musicians from France and Italy to come to these shores.[4] A number eventually settled here. Perhaps the best known is George Frederick Handel, who became a British citizen, and whose music was championed by the Hanoverian monarchs. Johann Christian Bach, the youngest son of the great Johann Sebastian, was employed as tutor to the royal children, and the Mozarts eagerly sought audiences before George III and Queen Caroline. One of the later musical monarchs, Queen Victoria, summoned most of the leading composers of her day, ranging from Rossini and Mendelssohn to Liszt and Saint-Saëns. Such occasions could give rise to difficulties, such as when Carl Nielsen was in London in April 1923 to conduct a concert of his own music. He was granted an audience with the Queen Mother, Alexandra, a Danish compatriot, at Marlborough House but had forgotten to pack a dark suit; he thereupon borrowed his son-in-law's, which was rather too small for him, and found the top buttons of his trousers would not fasten. A contemporary of Nielsen's described what happened next:

> 'Never mind,' he said. 'I'll just keep my hand over it and no one will notice.' With bated breath, his left hand before his midriff, he stepped towards Queen Alexandra and he expressed his deep thanks. After a while Alexandra's sister, the Empress of Dagmar of Russia, joined the company and it was announced that tea was served. Carl Nielsen was requested to lead both ladies to the table: with an empress on one arm and a queen on the other he walked across the room, hardly daring to breathe for fear his partly undone trousers should be noticed. But nobody seemed aware that the suit was too small.[5]

It is remarkable how much British literature and history has attracted foreign composers, even those who never ventured here. The inspiration provided by the plays of Shakespeare and the novels of Sir Walter Scott,

for example, has resulted in several major musical works, and incidents in the Wars of the Roses and the Tudor reign seem to have been particularly attractive to composers. We can think of operas based on Shakespeare, particularly by Verdi, such as *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Falstaff*, Mendelssohn's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* music which accompanies the play as well as Sibelius's *The Tempest*; mention must be made of that arch-Shakespeare lover, Berlioz, who set *Romeo and Juliet* to music and more recently of Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*, based on *The Taming of the Shrew*. Composers, from Schubert (*Who Is Sylvia?*) to Poulenc, have set his words to song. Similarly, Sir Walter Scott's works appear as the basis of operas, ranging from Donizetti's *Lucia di Lammermoor*, Rossini's *La donna del lago* (Lady of the Lake) to Bizet's *La Jolie Fille de Perth* (The Fair Maid of Perth). Whilst mentioning Scott, it is worth noting the fondness of nineteenth-century German composers for Scottish subjects. Mendelssohn's *The Hebrides* Overture, his 'Scottish' Symphony (No. 3 in A minor), Beethoven's arrangements of Scottish folk songs, Schumann's settings of the poems of Robert Burns, and Bruch's *Scottish Fantasy* are some of the better-known examples. The earlier period of British history has provided the factual, but also much fictional, basis for operas by Donizetti, *Rosmonda d'Inghilterra*, *Elisabetta al castello di Kenilworth*, and *Maria Stuarda*, Rossini's opera *Elisabetta, Regina d'Inghilterra*, the overture of which was recycled for *The Barber of Seville*, and Mercadante's *Margaret d'Anjou*. More recently, the Spanish composer Albéniz wrote a trilogy of operas on King Arthur as well as *Henry Clifford*. The prize for the most wildly inaccurate portrayal of Britain, however, must go to Donizetti's opera *Emilia di Liverpool*, which was set in the mountains supposedly surrounding the city.

Some visitors came to Britain as escapees from political or religious intolerance. The comparatively tolerant religious climate in England in the sixteenth century enabled both Jewish refugees from Italy, Spain and Portugal, and French Huguenots to make a significant impact on English musical life. Much later, the composer–pianists Ignaz Pleyel and Jan Ladislav Dussek and the violinist composer Giovanni Battista Viotti fled from the French Revolution. In the 1690s, Johann Christoph Pepusch resolved to leave Germany after witnessing the execution without trial of a Prussian officer for insubordination, 'and put himself under the protection of a government founded on better principles'.[6] The European Revolutions of 1848 saw the flight here of many composers, if only temporarily, such as Berlioz and Chopin. In the twentieth century, a much larger influx followed the rise of Hitler in Germany when a number of Jewish composers, including Berthold Goldschmidt, Egon Wellesz and Hans Gal, left their native country for England. Roberto Gerhard, the Spanish composer, settled in Cambridge in 1939 after the Republican defeat in the Civil War. Later, Andrzej Panufnik defected from communist Poland. In a slightly different category were the seventeenth-century

lutenist and composer Jacques Gaultier, who came to England from France to escape a murder charge, and Wagner, who was fleeing from his creditors. Not all visitors, moreover, were what they appeared to be. Robert Cambert, a seventeenth-century composer and harpsichordist, entered the court of Charles II as master of music to Louise de Queroualle, Duchess of Portsmouth, the king's mistress and, at the same time, seems to have been acting as a spy for Louis XIV.[7] By virtue of musicians' proximity to their royal hosts – they would often perform in the private chambers – they were ideally placed for this type of intrigue. François-André Danican Philidor, a member of the distinguished family of composers, came often to England; a superb chess player, noted for his simultaneous blindfold play, he made over twenty visits to England to display his skill between 1748 and 1792.[8] His text book *L'Analyze des échecs* was still being used into the twentieth century.

However, perhaps the greatest magnet can be summed up in a statement of the early eighteenth-century German composer Johann Mattheson: 'He who in the present time wants to make a profit out of music takes himself to England.'[9] Such was the main motive of Leopold Mozart with his child prodigies, the eight-year-old Wolfgang and his sister, Nannerl, the penurious Wagner, the dying Weber and the young Liszt, not to mention the already wealthy Rossini. The most outstanding example was Joseph Haydn, freed at last from his court duties at Esterháza and lured by substantial financial inducements. His two celebrated visits to Britain were at the behest of the German-born violinist and impresario Johann Peter Salomon, one of the great musical entrepreneurs. The dynamic concert scene in later eighteenth-century London ensured a good living for large numbers of musical visitors. Rewards, as well as losses, were potentially great if the composer himself acted as entrepreneur, as Handel sometimes did. A steadier income came from performing, for composers such as Bruckner, on the organ, or Bartók, on the piano.[10]

There were further possible rewards in the form of income from giving music lessons, common practice amongst musical visitors through the centuries. Even if they were not fortunate enough to teach the royal children, which Italian and Flemish musicians from as far back as the time of Henry VIII were to do, musicians could do very well from teaching. Until the nineteenth century, music education, and indeed the playing of music, was almost exclusively the province of the upper echelons of society, and to be involved in teaching therefore gave social respectability. From the 1760s, the piano began to dominate amateur music-making, and this was also the period when the important link between piano-makers and professional pianists was forged, to mutual advantage. This gave rise to the so-called London Pianoforte School, in effect a dynasty of composer–pianist visitors.[11] Generations of keyboard-players, from Johann Christian Bach in the 1760s to Chopin in the 1840s, were attracted both by the distinctive style of instruments and opportunities for performance in England.

From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the role of conductor began to rival and overtake that of performer. Some composer-visitors, such as Dvořák, Weber and Richard Strauss, were primarily conductors, in most cases performing their own works, though Mahler, on his only visit in 1892 conducted the *Ring* cycle.[12] The rise of music festivals, starting with the Three Choirs Festival early in the eighteenth century, produced further opportunities for visitors. An outstanding case was Birmingham, which had had a music festival sporadically since 1784. With the rise of the city as a wealthy manufacturing centre, the Festival Committee could afford to commission works from leading composers. The committee was able to persuade Mendelssohn to write his oratorio *Elijah* especially for the Festival of 1846 and this was followed by works by Gounod and Dvořák, as well as by many native composers such as Elgar. In 1842 there was a performance at the Norwich Festival of an oratorio *The Fall of Babylon* by Louis Spohr, who was then considered to be one of the greatest living composers. The work had been especially commissioned for the Festival.[13] A little later, the Leeds Festival (1858) commissioned such composers as Massenet and Humperdinck, and during the twentieth century the coming of the Edinburgh, Aldeburgh and other festivals opened up further opportunities for foreign composers.

A complementary factor was the rise of the musical entrepreneur, who from the mid eighteenth century, mounted public concerts. In 1764, Johannn Christian Bach and Karl Friedrich Abel, both composers and performers, instituted a series of subscription concerts, which continued for eighteen years. The growing demand by the public for music in the nineteenth century led to the building of concert venues such as the Exeter Hall (1831), the St James's Hall (1858), the enormous Royal Albert Hall (1871) and the Queen's Hall (1893). The last-named was particularly famous as being the home of the Promenade Concerts from their inception in 1895 until its destruction during the Second World War in 1941. These concerts attracted many foreign composers, some of whom gave the first performances of their own works. Paul Hindemith performed Walton's Viola Concerto at one of them and was pleased to make the acquaintance of 'the famous Sir Wood'. However, Hindemith strongly disapproved of one aspect of the proceedings: 'The audience stands around – SMOKING IS PERMITTED – and can do as it likes. Notices all over the place: PLEASE DON'T STRIKE MATCHES DURING THE MUSIC. One can feel really homesick for Zwickau or Biefeld.'[14] Since 1951, the South Bank Centre has witnessed the appearance of a stream of composer–conductors such as Aaron Copland and Aram Khachaturian and similarly, from 1982, at the Barbican. The Bechstein Hall (1901), renamed the Wigmore Hall during the First World War, has been a calling place for composers' chamber works. One frequent visitor to England, Gabriel Fauré, scored a great success when he appeared at the Hall in March 1908, playing

some of his own pieces and accompanying a singer.[15] On 20 and 26 March 1914, a year before his death, Alexander Scriabin gave two recitals of his own works there.[16] When Jánaček made his only visit to Britain in 1926, the Wigmore Hall was hired for a programme of his compositions.[17] It should also be remembered that there was an increasing number of musical venues outside London. From the eighteenth century onwards, Edinburgh was one of the cultural capitals of Europe. Dublin, too, had a rich musical life. Francesco Geminiani, the Italian composer of forty-two concerti grossi, spent several years in that city and it was also in Dublin that the first performance of Handel's *Messiah* took place in 1742. The English provinces were not ignored either. The Holywell Music Room in Oxford, the oldest purpose-built concert hall in Europe, was opened in 1748, possibly with a performance of Handel's oratorio *Esther*, directed by the composer, and the Manchester Gentlemen's Concerts, at which Chopin gave recitals some years later, were instituted in the 1770s. The first performance of *La Bohème* in Britain was given at the Comedy Theatre, Manchester in April 1897, Puccini travelling from Italy for the occasion.[18] The establishment of the Hallé Orchestra in the city provided further opportunities, whilst in neighbouring Liverpool, Max Bruch was conductor of the Philharmonic Society for three years.

Life for the celebrity has always had its drawbacks, and great composers were often not the most tolerant guests. Visiting composers frequently complained about the ritual of being fêted by well-meaning gatherings. Sibelius, who conducted many of his own works in England from the early years of the twentieth century, was a well-liked figure. He once visited The Music Club, whose members he described as comprising 'largely well off elderly gentlemen with double chins and asthmatic coughs, together with expensively bejewelled and fur-clad wives'. In 1909, the same year that Debussy, D'Indy and Schoenberg had been invited, Sibelius was the guest of honour. He was subject to the unvarying routine of these occasions: 'First the composer of the evening was seated in the middle of the stage where he was harangued by the Chairman. After this he took his place among the audience to listen to some of his own chamber and instrumental music.'[19] Sergei Rachmaninov proved to be less amenable in March 1939, when he was made an honorary member of the Savage Club. New members were expected to play 'a few pieces' in return for their hospitality, but Rachmaninov, much to their disappointment, refused to do so.[20]

The length of stay of composers varied widely, as did the number of visits. Alessandro Striggio, composer and diplomat to the Medici court, visited the court in England for just fifteen days in 1567, but in that time, a performance before Queen Elizabeth of his forty-voice motet *Ecce beatam lucem* seems to have inspired Thomas Tallis to embark on a similar project, his *Spem in alium*.[21] The German keyboardist and composer Johann Jakob Froberger was robbed by pirates between Calais and Dover

on his visit in the 1650s, and beat a hasty retreat back to the Continent, where his Allemande *Plainte faite à Londres pour passer la mélancholie* laments his wretched experience of England. Among the most frequent visitors were Louis Spohr, the violinist, conductor and composer, who made six visits between 1822 and 1853, and Saint-Saëns returned several times between 1871 and 1913; Dvořák came to England six times and the lionised Mendelssohn ten.[22] Gounod stayed for three years in St John's Wood with his landlady and lover, the notorious Georgina Weldon.[23] Joseph Haydn's amorous affairs when he was in England are well known, and the fifty-one-year-old Paganini scandalised society with his infatuation with the sixteen-year-old Charlotte Watson.[24] Liszt's two visits were forty-five years apart. Johann Christian Bach spent the last eighteen years of his life in London and is buried in a mass grave in St Pancras churchyard. This was in striking contrast to Handel, resident in Britain for nearly half a century, who died wealthy and was buried in Westminster Abbey. There were those who came to this country who were nevertheless profoundly influenced by their experiences in England. Gluck left Milan for London in 1745 for the production of two of his operas at the Haymarket Theatre. During his stay, he made the acquaintance of Handel's music, thereafter declaring him to be his favourite composer, keeping a portrait of him in his bedroom.[25] The young Mozart met and was taken up by Johann Christian Bach, some twenty-one years his senior, and was greatly influenced by Bach's fresh and original style. In July and August 1905 we see Claude Debussy staying at Eastbourne, bringing with him the proofs of *La Mer*. He was impressed with the view of the sea, taking many photographs from his balcony at the Grand Hotel. It is interesting to note that the eighteen-year-old Rimsky-Korsakov, then a midshipman in the Russian Navy, spent five months in England from late 1862 to February 1863, whilst his clipper was refitted. He, along with others of his friends, visited London two or three times, going to the opera at Covent Garden, though in his autobiography he admitted that he could not remember what he had seen.[26]

One of the important features of the capital's musical life from the nineteenth century was the Philharmonic Society of London, now the Royal Philharmonic Society. Its encouragement of orchestral and instrumental concerts from its inauguration in 1813 at the Argyll Rooms attracted many foreign composers. Mendelssohn wrote for, and dedicated his First Symphony to, the Society and Saint-Saëns was commissioned by the Society to write his Third Symphony (Organ Symphony) which he conducted in 1886.[27] Dvořák's Seventh Symphony is another outstanding example. It also commissioned from Beethoven (who wished to visit England but never did) his 'Choral' Symphony, when he was in dire need of money. The Society was a showcase for composers who wished to conduct their own works:[28] Chopin was exceptional in refusing their offer. Other types of patronage which brought visitors to these shores were of