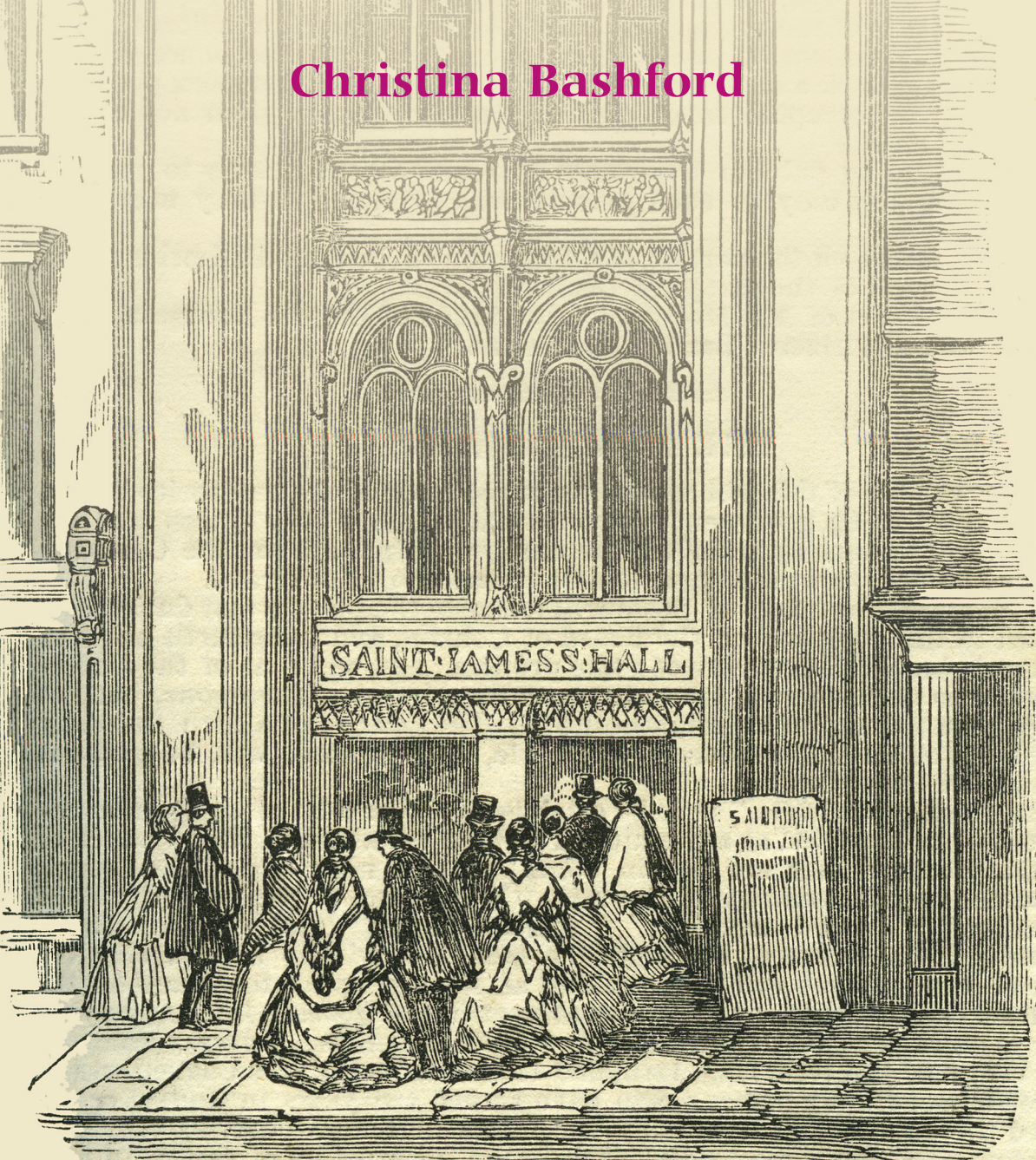


# The Pursuit of High Culture

JOHN ELLA AND CHAMBER MUSIC  
IN VICTORIAN LONDON

**Christina Bashford**



THE PURSUIT  
OF HIGH CULTURE

JOHN ELLA AND CHAMBER MUSIC  
IN VICTORIAN LONDON

# Music in Britain, 1600–1900

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Christina Bashford

THE BOYDELL PRESS



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*For my friends*





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*February 2007*

# List of Abbreviations

## *General*

- b. born
- d. died
- esp. especially
- n. note
- sup. supplement

## *Special Collections, Libraries and Archives*

BL	British Library, London
CWA	City of Westminster Archives, London
EllaC	John Ella Collection, Bodleian Library, Oxford
LRO	Leicester Record Office
NA	National Archives, Kew
NAS	National Archives of Scotland
PRO	Public Record Office, National Archives, Kew
RAMa	Royal Academy of Music, London, Archives
RAMm	Royal Academy of Music, London, McCann Collection
RCMa	Royal College of Music, London, Archives
RCMI	Royal College of Music, London, Library
RCMp	Royal College of Music, London, Centre for Performance History
UBCsc	University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Special Collections and University Archives

## *Journals and Newspapers frequently cited*

19CM	19th-century Music
CJ	<i>The Court Journal</i>
DN	<i>The Daily News</i>
DT	<i>The Daily Telegraph</i>
ILN	<i>The Illustrated London News</i>
JRMA	<i>Journal of the Royal Musical Association</i>
MC	<i>The Morning Chronicle</i>
MH	<i>The Morning Herald</i>
MMR	<i>The Monthly Musical Record</i>

MP	<i>The Morning Post</i>
MR	<i>The Musical Record</i>
MS	<i>The Musical Standard</i>
MT	<i>The Musical Times</i>
MW	<i>The Musical World</i>
M&L	<i>Music &amp; Letters</i>
RMU	<i>Record of the Musical Union</i>
RMWE	<i>Record of the Musical Winter Evenings</i>
ST	<i>The Sunday Times</i>

### Other works frequently cited

- BashfordPCC* Christina Bashford. 'Public Chamber-Music Concerts in London, 1835–50: Aspects of History, Repertory and Reception'. PhD, University of London, 1996.
- CCSCM* *Cobbett's Cyclopedic Survey of Chamber Music*. Comp. and ed. Walter Willson Cobbett. 2 vols. Oxford and London: Oxford University Press, 1929–30.
- DavisonFM* Henry Davison, comp. *From Mendelssohn to Wagner: Being the Memoirs of J. W. Davison, Forty Years Music Critic of 'The Times'*. London: William Reeves, 1912.
- DiehlMM* Alice M. Diehl. *Musical Memories*. London: Richard Bentley & Son, 1897.
- DNB* *Dictionary of National Biography*. Ed. Leslie Stephen and Sidney Lee. 66 vols. London: Smith, Elder, 1885–1901.
- EhrlichFP* Cyril Ehrlich. *First Philharmonic: a History of the Royal Philharmonic Society*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995.
- EhrlichMP* Cyril Ehrlich. *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century: a Social History*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985.
- EllaMS1* John Ella. *Musical Sketches, Abroad and at Home*. London: Ridgway, 1869.
- EllaMS2* John Ella. *Musical Sketches, Abroad and at Home*. 2nd edition. London: Ridgway, 1869 [recte 1872].
- EllaMS3* John Ella. *Musical Sketches, Abroad and at Home*. 3rd edition. Rev. and ed. John Belcher. London: William Reeves, 1878.
- FauquetS* Joël-Marie Fauquet. *Les sociétés de musique de chambre à Paris de la Restauration à 1870*. Paris: Aux Amateurs de Livres, 1986.
- FétisB* *Biographie universelle des musiciens*. Ed. F.-J. Fétis. 2nd edition. 8 vols. Paris: Firmin Didot, 1866–8.

- FétisBS* *Biographie universelle des musiciens*. Supplement. Ed. Arthur Pougin. 2 vols. Paris: Firmin Didot, 1878–80.
- GanzMM* Wilhelm Ganz. *Memories of a Musician: Reminiscences of Seventy Years of Musical Life*. London: John Murray, 1913.
- GGMVC* George Grove, *Music and Victorian Culture*. Ed. Michael Musgrave. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003.
- Grove3* *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 3rd edition. Ed. H. C. Colles. 5 vols. London: Macmillan, 1927–8.
- Groves* *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 5th edition. Ed. Eric Blom. 9 vols. London: Macmillan, 1954.
- HanslickA* Eduard Hanslick. 'Briefe aus London [1862]', *Aus dem Concertsaal: Kritiken und Schilderungen aus den letzten 20 Jahren des Wiener Musiklebens, nebst einem Anhang: Musikalische Reisebriefe aus England, Frankreich und der Schweiz*. Vienna: Wilhelm Braumüller, 1870, pp. 487–517.
- HaweisJE* H. R. Haweis. *John Ella: a Sketch from Life*. Pamphlet, London, 1885. [First published in *Truth* (1 Nov 1883), pp. 620–2.]
- MBC* *Music and British Culture, 1785–1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich*. Ed. Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- McVeighA* Simon McVeigh. "An Audience for High-Class Music": Concert Promoters and Entrepreneurs in Late-Nineteenth-Century London, *The Musician as Entrepreneur, 1700–1914: Managers, Charlatans, and Idealists*. Ed. William Weber. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2004, pp. 162–82.
- McVeighCL* Simon McVeigh. *Concert Life in London from Mozart to Haydn*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- NBMS* *Nineteenth-Century British Music Studies*. Ed. Bennett Zon *et al.* 3 vols. Aldershot: Ashgate, 1993–2003.
- NGDM1* *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 20 vols. London: Macmillan, 1980.
- NGDM2* *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*. 2nd edition. Ed. Stanley Sadie. 29 vols. London: Macmillan, 2001.
- ODNB* *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography: From the Earliest Times to the Year 2000*. Ed. H. C. G. Matthew and Brian Harrison. 60 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.
- RohrCBM* Deborah Rohr. *The Careers of British Musicians, 1750–1850: a Profession of Artisans*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.
- WangerméeF* François-Joseph Fétis: *Correspondance*. Comp. and ed. Robert Wangermée. Sprimont: Editions Mardaga, 2006.



1 John Ella in 1851. Lithograph by Charles Baugniet, published in the *Record of the Musical Union* (1858).  
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## INTRODUCTION

### The Case for Ella

EMINENT in his own day, neglected by posterity: that has been the lot of John Ella, a man who by the middle decades of the nineteenth century had risen from provincial, artisan-class obscurity to become a figure of power and influence in London musical life and high society, a successful concert manager and entrepreneur, and a relentless and successful proselytizer for the highest of musical art. He was important as an organizer and ‘enabler’ (the behind-the-scenes fixer who made things happen) rather than as a performer or composer, the traditional subjects for music biography. And, paradoxically for a nation cursed with the label ‘Das Land ohne Musik,’ he operated in times when music mattered to people to a degree that can barely be overstated today, and in London, the city that claimed the largest concentration of public music-making and musicians than any other in Britain or Europe. His Musical Union (1845–81), a concert society devoted to the promotion of chamber music in general, and the heartland of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven string quartets in particular, was his most celebrated achievement: a quasi-temple for the contemplation of high culture, through what was deemed the best in Western classical music.<sup>1</sup> It brought many of the finest instrumentalists in Europe before a well-heeled audience of serious-minded metropolitan music-lovers, and it endured for more than three and a half decades, combining a lustre of excellence and solemnity with an economic buoyancy that many a Victorian concert-organizer must have envied. In spite of this, the unusual tale of Ella, shaper of musical taste and culture, and of his celebrated concert institution, has never been told in depth, less still has the Musical Union’s history been adequately attempted. For Ella is a largely unknown figure, and to some he will seem an obscure subject for a biography.

<sup>1</sup> High culture, and John Ella’s pursuit of it, is defined in this book as those products of the arts, philosophy and science that have been held in greatest esteem by society and deemed to require sophisticated (i.e. cultured) understanding. Although historically the province of social élites, high culture was in Victorian times becoming increasingly accessible to all who aspired to appreciate it. In particular, definitions of classical (i.e. art) music, as that which appeals to ‘developed’ taste and is distinct from popular or folk music, were being laid down during the nineteenth century. The tightly constructed instrumental genres of symphony, sonata and string quartet were generally considered to aspire to such yardsticks, and hierarchies of genres and individual works were emerging.

Admittedly, we have been slow to recognize the importance of the role of the enabler or fixer in sustaining musical activity in nineteenth-century Britain.<sup>2</sup> In part this has been tied to a more general failure to appreciate what it was that made the music and musicians of Britain so different from what was to be found in the rest of Europe: notably, Britain's lack of established musical infrastructures and its commercially driven concert life. During Ella's lifetime, most of central Europe (France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Italy) boasted well-resourced educational institutions for composers and performers, with national opera houses as further training grounds, and it provided meaningful patronage or financial subsidy for musical performances, whether through courts, aristocrats, men of wealth, church, national governments or municipalities. Britain, in sharp contrast, offered relatively modest and unsystematic training opportunities and an open, unrestricted market-place. It also provided sustained employment only through its church music structures, a slight and underwhelming royal music, and its military (this last being a notable oasis of good musical standards, and a source from which skilled wind and brass players often sprang). Meanwhile, and for much of the nineteenth century, concert-giving in Britain happened off its own bat, and mainly because of the nous of individuals, usually the musicians themselves, which meant the job of enabling was crucial to public performance taking place at all. For the first three-quarters of the century at least, only a handful of the ever-swelling number of concert series achieved any permanence beyond two or three seasons. In such conditions, a shrewd and effective organizer like Ella could make an important mark, creating a robust concert-giving enterprise that married artistic excellence with financial success. Even so, Ella was operating during times of change, when older, eighteenth-century practices of giving concerts before what might be described as 'patronage networks' (audiences formed from a small slice of society that musicians serviced in other ways) were giving way to more impersonal and overtly business-driven modes of operation. How he responded to the flux is a significant part of his story.

Among other reasons enablers have escaped scholarly scrutiny is surely the suspicion that such behind-the-scenes people are of little intrinsic interest for a history of music. How can the man who made music happen be as important as those who 'made' the music itself, whether as composers or performers? So the thinking has traditionally gone, even in Ella's lifetime – a period, after all, when the idea of the composer as creative artist crystallized. (And in Ella's case, the fact that he abandoned his run-of-the-mill existence as a practical musician for

<sup>2</sup> The term 'enabler', as I use it in relation to Ella, was usefully coined by Cyril Ehrlich in his discussion of Francesco Berger, secretary of the Philharmonic Society of London, in *EhrlichFP*, 138.

fixing, organizing and – ultimately – taste-shaping adds a further stigma: that of the ‘failed player’.) On a practical note, too, there are severe difficulties in writing about enablers, because often their activities have vanished from the historical record. For many of them we can only extrapolate how effective they were. But where relevant sources survive (and for Ella they do), it is possible to see what a difference a good organizer could make within Britain’s precarious, market-driven musical culture.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, Ella emerges through this enquiry as someone able to make things happen smoothly and successfully in every respect – artistic, logistic and financial; and as someone who learned fast how to attend to detail, to minimize risks, to monitor activities, to adapt quickly and inventively to changing situations, and to exploit opportunities as they arose. What is more, he did it with a good dose of economic caution and a burning conviction for ‘serious’ music.

Another concept that is crucial to understanding Ella’s role in nineteenth-century British musical life is bound up in the term ‘sacralization’ – the processes by which particular musical works became the focus of deep, quasi-religious veneration as autonomous art objects. The nineteenth century was the period when art music became established as a serious, central part of European bourgeois public life, offering a special, aesthetic experience increasingly within the reach of anyone who aspired to appreciate it (and thousands did).<sup>4</sup> Across national borders and well into the twentieth century, the works of certain European composers – most notably Beethoven and later Wagner – became the focus for intense reverence and inspiration in cultural life at large, with music, of all the arts so treated,

<sup>3</sup> EhrlichFP, 132–57.

<sup>4</sup> On the sacralization of high culture in nineteenth-century Europe, see T. C. W. Blanning, ‘The Commercialization and Sacralization of European Culture in the Nineteenth Century’, *The Oxford Illustrated History of Modern Europe*, ed. T. C. W. Blanning (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 120–47. The concept is explored in its American context by Lawrence W. Levine in his *Highbrow/Lowbrow: the Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 83–168. See also Ralph P. Locke, ‘Music Lovers, Patrons and the “Sacralization” of Culture in America’, *19CM*, 17 (1993), 149–73.

Focused work on sacralization’s processes (including the emergence of a central canon of ‘great’, mostly Austro-Germanic, music, and the ritualistic playing out of ideologies in the concert hall), its principal proponents and causes, has also emerged: see, for instance, William Weber, *The Rise of Musical Classics in Eighteenth-Century England: a Study in Canon, Ritual and Ideology* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Katharine Ellis, *Music Criticism in Nineteenth-Century France: La revue et gazette musicale de Paris, 1834–80* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); and Rachel Cowgill, ‘The London Apollonicon Recitals, 1817–32: a Case Study in Bach, Mozart, and Haydn Reception’, *JRMA*, 123 (1998), 190–228.

seeming to hold a particular aura.<sup>5</sup> Some of this was due to music's very nature, for as historian T. C. W. Blanning points out, however many galleries and museums were built to house and sanctify the fine arts, they simply could not match the ultimate, truly communal, transcendent – or 'sacral' – experience that music offered its audience in the form of public performance, whereby the musician was able to 'appeal to a large number of people through their emotions simultaneously and collectively'.<sup>6</sup> Blanning, making use of the ideas of Jürgen Habermas and talking in pan-European terms, attributes much of the rise of sacralized culture to the decline of older forms of patronage for the arts and the emergence of the public sphere in the eighteenth century and to incipient commercialization in the nineteenth, which together bred a tension between sacralization and art as consumerism.<sup>7</sup> In his view, as culture became 'democratized' and available to mass markets, the sacral was increasingly polarized against the popular and vulgar, especially as the latter was evidently almost always driven by commercial concerns.<sup>8</sup>

The lack in Britain of the sort of art-music patronage and infrastructures typical of other European cultures, especially the Germanic states, made musical life more directly relatable to the vicissitudes of market forces. In this context, an investigation of Ella's Musical Union is highly revealing. For, as we shall see, Ella was careful to balance high culture's growing dependence on commercial viability with an insistence on the special condition of the work of art and its sacralized status.<sup>9</sup> He tirelessly sought to establish the instrumental chamber repertoire, especially Beethoven's, presenting it as the acme of musical achievement. And he went to great lengths to explain that repertoire's aesthetic significance and the reasons for insisting on its veneration. But this he did within the boundaries of the marketplace, in the sense that the Musical Union had to be financially self-supporting. So although one case-study will not a full history make, an examination of Ella's

<sup>5</sup> Blanning, 'Commercialization', 135–6: 'So powerful was Beethoven's influence that it lasted into the following century, reaching its apotheosis in 1902 when the artists of the Vienna Secession decided to transform their entire building into a temple to receive the statue of Beethoven by the Leipzig sculptor Max Klinger'; see also *ibid.*, p. 139. Beethoven's posthumous impact on subsequent generations of musicians has long been acknowledged.

<sup>6</sup> Blanning, 'Commercialization', 136.

<sup>7</sup> Blanning, 'Commercialization', *passim*. For more on his view of the eighteenth-century background, see his *The Culture of Power and the Power of Culture: Old Regime Europe, 1660–1789* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> See Blanning, 'Commercialization', esp. 120, 126, 133–5. These themes often run counter to one another in modern discussions of London concert life (see *McVeighA*, 162).

<sup>9</sup> This idea is touched on in *McVeighA*, 170.

proselytizing for high art among a particular tranche of society on the one hand, and his deft exploitation of the market-place on the other, may help us begin to understand more of the processes of cultural formation in London.

ELLA died in 1888, and it took some two generations before his importance began to be even partially recognized. Most of the existing biographical accounts of Ella date from the first half of the twentieth century, a period when reactions against the Victorians and condescension towards nineteenth-century British music were at a height. They are primarily documentary and anecdotal. After the obituaries there were short entries in the standard dictionaries (the *Dictionary of National Biography*; the several editions of Grove's *Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, and in Walter Willson Cobbett's quirky chamber music encyclopedia), minor coverage in Percy Scholes's compilation of journalistic vignettes from the *Musical Times* (1947) and then, in 1953, a first attempt to draw a proper outline of Ella's career in an article in *Music & Letters* by music-lover and amateur scholar John Ravell. Significantly but unsurprisingly, given the British *Zeitgeist*, Ravell's article was heavily abridged, Richard Capell (*M&L*'s editor) publishing it without the footnotes that had been supplied, and expressing not a little scepticism that 'the interest of the subject warrant[s] this length' [c.5,000 words].<sup>10</sup>

The next two decades revealed a little more interest in the broad arena of Victorian music, with Ella and the Musical Union popping up in surveys by Robert Elkin (*The Old Concert Rooms of London*, 1955) and Percy Young (*The Concert Tradition*, 1965), and in the first attempt at a social history of English music by E. D. Mackerness (1964). Yet these books largely repeated existing observations and documents, while occasionally using Ella's published memoirs as source material. Later still, William Weber's *Music and the Middle Class* (1975; 2/2003) swept the Musical Union into a broad comparative social history of European audiences, also on the basis of a few primary documents. What all generalist work lacked was an in-depth history of the Musical Union or a critical biography of Ella on which to build – but it was a topic that would barely have counted as *echt* musicology or have been of interest to mainstream historians thirty or forty years ago. Curiosity about contexts for music performance and reception – today swelling remarkably – was the province of the few, and until relatively recently music in nineteenth-century Britain was considered a marginal area of study. I remember the eyebrows that were raised, then politely lowered, when I announced Victorian chamber-music concerts as my intended research topic in the mid-1980s. In an essentially composer-/work-led musicology, the apparent 'problem' that hardly any British composers were known for their chamber music would have been reason enough

<sup>10</sup> Letter from Capell to Ravell (dated 10 January 1952) in my possession.

not to proceed with contextual work. However, as the pioneering scholar of nineteenth-century British music Nicholas Temperley had already shown, many composers did write chamber music, even if little of it was published, and only a few manuscripts appear to have survived.<sup>11</sup> Moreover there was a perception that Britain lacked a substantial tradition of domestic quartet playing – a contention that awaits full testing, but which would have suggested there was little to investigate in terms of social contexts. (Ian Woodfield's recent study of music-making in Anglo-Indian eighteenth-century society demonstrates that such claims may well be unfounded,<sup>12</sup> and the present book makes a small contribution to that debate.) And yet – and here is the rub – European chamber music constituted a large portion of what actually got played in public at the time, with the average middle-class Londoner in the 1860s having, for reasons of economics (chamber music was much cheaper to put on than orchestral music), far more opportunities to hear a Beethoven violin sonata than a Beethoven symphony – and more often than not taking them.

Nowadays, in the wake of a substantial wave of fresh scholarship on the function and meaning of music in nineteenth-century Britain, some of it taking strong bearings from social and economic history, there ought to be little need to defend the subject of this book – in his role as the instigator of London's primary chamber-music society – to the wider world. That said, even in mainstream musicology, the performance and consumption of chamber music in nineteenth-century Europe has been for a long time a curiously neglected area of study, its richness and depths unplumbed until recently. Narratives of nineteenth-century music history typically concentrate on the strong, virile image of the virtuoso performer (Paganini, Liszt) or charismatic conductor (Wagner, Von Bülow) that is seemingly at odds with the essentially democratic, private communion of players at the heart of chamber-music making. Perhaps the diagnosis that Romantic musical idioms were diametrically opposed to the quintessence of quartet writing lurks on in the subconscious, preventing forays into performance contexts. The image of chamber music, especially string quartets, as the province of aficionados, amateur practitioners and connoisseurs can prove problematic too, particularly outside musicology, where the stereotype is reinforced by the still undeniable association of chamber music with high seriousness – most spectacularly in Beethoven's quartets. As the genre widely considered the highest of high musical art, chamber music can, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, seem uncomfortable to

<sup>11</sup> Nicholas Temperley, 'Instrumental Music in England, 1800–1850' (PhD, University of Cambridge, 1959).

<sup>12</sup> Ian Woodfield, *Music of the Raj: a Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

people who feel uneasy with notions of élitism.<sup>13</sup> But the Victorians had no such hang-ups: the pursuit of high culture and the acceptance of authority were values that went to the core of society, proclaimed most famously by Matthew Arnold (*Culture and Anarchy*, 1869). And that is why the history of chamber music in Britain, through the career and activities of John Ella, is so rewarding to explore – a pertinent demonstration of what the novelist L. P. Hartley described as the foreignness of the past.<sup>14</sup>

### Sources and problems

HISTORIANS and biographers need sources, and with Ella there are materials in abundance, including matters of both public and private record. All require careful selection and judicious interpretation. Most notable of the primary materials is the John Ella Collection (in the Bodleian Library, Oxford), a cache of diaries, letters, photographs, notebooks and scrapbooks that enables a unique view of his doings and changing fortunes, from rank-and-file orchestral fiddler to powerful organizer and taste-shaper. For years the collection sat in a cast-iron trunk, biding its time in the home of a descendent of one of Ella's cousins, until John Ravell tracked it down, used it as the basis for his *Music & Letters* essay, and eventually ensured its survival as a private archive. It was at his house in London that I first glimpsed the materials in 1989 and was permitted to consult them. In late 1995, recognizing my desire and intention to pursue extended research, he kindly put the collection at my disposal in Oxford.

At the collection's heart are Ella's pocket diaries, spanning 1823 to 1887, which he kept zealously for much of his life. Containing only a few gaps in coverage, mostly early on (a handful of diaries are skimpy in their content, especially those for 1823–31; diaries for 1827–8, 1832–4, 1837, 1883 and 1888 do not survive), they offer valuable insights into the changing patterns and rhythms of Ella's professional and social life. That is perhaps their greatest strength, since Ella was no great diarist. It is true that he was, throughout his career, a fluent scribbler (writing for the *Athenaeum*, *Court Journal*, *Orchestra* and *Morning Post*), but he used his diary more as an appointment book and log of activities than as a literary journal or vehicle for extended private testimony. Personal thoughts on much of the life that was being played out – including many significant happenings – are frustratingly

<sup>13</sup> There have been several discussions of the perceived 'problem' of classical music in modern culture, e.g. Julian Johnson, *Who Needs Classical Music?: Cultural Choice and Musical Value* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002).

<sup>14</sup> The famous quotation bears repetition: 'The past is a foreign country; they do things differently there' (*The Go-Between*, 1953).



absent. Still, his comings and goings, social encounters, railway journeys and so on are all there in all their valuable ordinariness, with signal events conveniently flagged. And if tedious to read as journals, they nevertheless glint with period detail and yield evidence of private musical culture that is rarely found in historical sources. Besides, there were spells in the diarizing, most notably in the 1830s and 60s, when Ella went beyond his norms, and recorded a vivid, vibrant commentary on the music he played and heard, and the people he met, not just in London but in Paris, Vienna, Prague, Florence and Pest, perhaps in the knowledge that he would use it later as the basis for some journalism. There were also a handful of moments when he confided his hopes, frustrations and despair; and many entries used remnants of shorthand – a version adapted from Samuel Taylor's system of 1786 – often for speed, occasionally for privacy. With perseverance and a cipher to hand, much of the code can be cracked. These are riches indeed. A selection of such telling remarks and useful information has naturally found its way into this biographical narrative.

In the later years of his life Ella began to see his diaries as a source for income generation and a niche in the annals of posterity, and in the 1870s he sought advice and possible collaboration on the project from a friend, the clergyman and writer on music Hugh Haweis. Publication never materialized, yet it is evident, from the layers of inks and nature of alterations in Ella's hand, that he annotated, pruned and corrected entries (even excised pages?) with an eye to excerpts from the diaries being committed to print, something that has to be borne in mind when using the archive today. Similar processes seem to have affected Ella's scrapbooks, which bear further scars of much mind-changing about what should be inserted or retained. There was also an expectation that the entire collection would be inspected critically after his death: his executors (John Belcher the architect, and the banker Thomas Phillips) were instructed to 'examine' his 'private correspondence[,] diaries and memorandum books' and to destroy or sell them as they saw fit.<sup>15</sup> He would not have been the first to try to massage his posthumous reputation.

Whether the selection of personal materials that survives in the Ella Collection was made by his executors and for what reasons; whether most of the filtering was done by Ella before his death; or whether the shape of the collection is the result of other, more serendipitous causes, I cannot judge, but evidently only a portion of what once existed has lasted. Among the practical uses Ella found for his diary was the industrious recording of letters sent and received, an activity that reached a peak during the years of the Musical Union, and suggesting a correspondence of tens, if not hundreds, of thousands of items. Yet of that mountain of letters, only

<sup>15</sup> John Ella's will, dated 23 September 1880, proved 6 November 1888 (Principal Probate Registry, London).

about 300 survive in the Ella Collection and are a somewhat haphazard selection, mostly dating from his later years. Clearly the majority was destroyed, either by Ella (he frequently noted that he had read and destroyed correspondence) or his executors. In addition, Ella saw some letters as having potential importance for the historical record, and he retained a few from star Musical Union artists, invariably correspondence that reflected well on his relationship with the performers. He preserved such items alongside photographs and other memorabilia.

Other documents seem to have survived by chance. Some have disappeared altogether. These include materials relating to the administration of the Musical Union. Many institutional records, such as addresses of subscribers, subscription ledgers, neatly presented formal accounts, and so on – the sort of business documentation that is so firmly and conveniently in place for the Philharmonic Society, and which must have once existed, even allowing for Ella's autocratic ways of working – are simply not there, although there are a couple of personal account books, covering the 1850s and 60s, that are a gold-mine of information. More often than not, facts and figures on the business side of the Musical Union have to be pieced together from diverse parts of the archive. Further gaps in the sources include material relating to the early years of Ella's life and to his private worlds. Although its absence has proved frustrating, there are ways forward, however imperfect. For short stretches of this study, historically informed conjecture and reconstruction of norms (always labelled as such) play an important part. In Chapter 2, for example, knowledge of artisan-class life and education in Leicester helps us imagine what Ella's youth might have been like. To compound the general difficulties, contradictions between the source materials abound; I indicate in footnotes how I have reconciled significant discrepancies.

In spite of these caveats about unevenness, inconsistency and possible distortion, the Ella Collection remained a vital source for this monograph. At the same time, other primary materials offered complementary information and importantly different perspectives on the man and his activities. They include manuscript correspondence between Ella and his patrons and associates, housed in a range of research libraries; published memoirs and manuscript sources connected with a host of his contemporaries; the annual *Record of the Musical Union* (1845–81), a compilation of the season's printed concert programmes, written by Ella and supplemented by news, gossip and features on a wide range of musical issues; his volume of reminiscences, mostly culled from the *Record of the Musical Union* and entitled *Musical Sketches, Abroad and at Home* (1869; 3/1878); and other miscellaneous journalism by him and others. Published information is by no means unproblematic to interpret, and chief among the problems of handling Ella's published material is the puffery and exaggeration he (like so many Victorians) indulged in, in respect of his own achievements. Nearly all openly authored

sources of the period were prone to anything from euphemistic restraint to 'spin', from suppression of information to rose-tinted nostalgia. Meanwhile, in the press, where anonymity supposedly shielded a critic's identity, partisanship flourished (Ella's included), a feature that can be revealing of local professional politics. Indeed, opinion was often divided on Ella's entrepreneurial initiatives, making journalism a lively constituent of the source material. Both general newspapers and specialist music periodicals are drawn on in this study, although the sheer volume of available material, as well as issues of bias, has demanded informed and representative selection. I have also, for purposes of broad contextualization and an understanding of the interplay of continuity and change in musical culture across the period, been able to draw on the *Concert Life in 19th-Century London Database*.<sup>16</sup>

### *Biographical and historical approaches*

THIS book is a study of Ella's life, work and times. It combines a biography of Ella with a history of the Musical Union, including its players, repertoire and audiences, and sets them against the backdrop of gradually shifting contexts for concerts, chamber music and cultural life in Victorian London. Themes of enabling, sacralization, social networks and upward mobility loom large. Since this is the first full-length biography of its subject, the chapter framework is deliberately chronological, in the hope of establishing the sequence of Ella's career, and delivering a sense of the competing influences on the man, the complexities of his motivations, the messiness of his daily life, and the gradual sense of change within and around it. It was a long life: 1802–88, the story beginning in Leicester during the Napoleonic wars and ending in the relentlessly growing capital of the 1870s and 80s – a span of time when concert life, among other things, altered considerably. No attempt is made to document Ella's story year by year. In a biography of a creative artist, a composer particularly, there might be good reasons for wanting to document happenings in painstaking, chronological detail, since all sorts and sequences of events, social relationships and so on, might have a bearing on artistic decisions and directions. But with a figure like Ella, that level of close narration is not just unnecessary but actually undesirable. Although, at a few junctures in his life-story, events unfold in a closely documented, sequential way, elsewhere the narrative prefers a synthesized, synoptic view of the changing rhythms and patterns of Ella's social and professional life over a decade or more.

Biography may seem an unusual framework in which to position a history of a concert institution. But here the material dictates the shape, since the Musical Union's leadership and management was solely in Ella's hands for thirty-six of its

<sup>16</sup> Research project in conjunction with Rachel Cowgill and Simon McVeigh.

thirty-seven years. 'The Musical Union is John Ella, and John Ella is the Musical Union, and without him it would be nothing,' wrote a music critic on Ella's retirement in 1880, unwittingly prophesying the society's rapid demise under another concert manager in 1881, and summing up perfectly the inseparability of the two subjects.<sup>17</sup> In the post-1845 chapters of the book, the narrative necessarily shifts back and forth between sections shadowing Ella's changing fortunes and his negotiation of public and private spheres, to ones examining the Musical Union, its repertoire and audiences over time. In fact, Ella was engaged in a range of additional activities (running an amateur opera club, giving lectures on music, and so on), most of them over a significant period of years; their histories too are entwined with his biography. At the same time, a few elements of Ella's personal life and family situation have been included, where relevant, to create a meaningful context for his quest for social advancement and to explain the typically Victorian tensions that developed between Ella's public and private domains.

The problems of how to integrate life and 'works' or, in Ella's case, 'achievements' are familiar to all biographers. In many chapters the reader is invited to make several journeys through a specified time span, exploring it through deliberately juxtaposed topics and perspectives. For example, in a chapter that covers eleven years from 1858 to 1868 the period is visited four times: the first section concerns the Musical Union as it became embedded into St James's Hall and as Ella responded to competition from other series; in the second, Ella's newly founded institution, the Musical Union Institute, which provided him not only with a 'shop front' and permanent base, but also a lobbying post for addressing issues of national music education and government support for music more generally, is unravelled; in the third, the narrative switches dramatically to Ella's personal world; in the fourth, the function and significance of his trips abroad, of which there were several in the 1860s, are discussed. It should be obvious that in real life none of these events existed for Ella in such a self-contained manner, and there is necessary interweaving between sections, as well as a few overlaps of chronology between chapters.

Inevitably, the events Ella organized, the musicians who played in them, and the subscribers who supported them are best understood when related to the broader historical situation – social, geographical, musical, intellectual and so on. Indeed, Ella's importance is so singularly bound up with the milieux in which he worked that without such a contextualization his life story would amount to a pretty dry and meaningless repository of facts. At the most basic level, then, this book attempts to incorporate a sense of London's changing demography and urbanization, and its cultural-cum-concert life. Between his first days in the capital

<sup>17</sup> *MMR*, 10 (1880), 115.

in the early 1820s and his twilight years of the 1880s, Ella saw London expand in terms of both population and conurbation, to become a gargantuan settlement: the 'primate city', vastly larger than any other in Britain, indeed Europe, and the trading and financial centre of the world.<sup>18</sup> In 1821 it had some 1.3 million residents, living within the area we now think of largely as the West End and City; if necessary it could be traversed on foot. By 1881 the population had become a vast 4.7 million, the majority of whom inhabited the newly created, sprawling suburbs; the only way they might ever comprehend the city's geography was through the innovations of rail travel.<sup>19</sup> Residential estates were laid down and grand buildings erected, including the rebuilt Houses of Parliament, Paxton's Crystal Palace in Hyde Park (later removed to Sydenham), the rival Alexandra Palace in Muswell Hill, the South Kensington museums, the Royal Albert Hall and several railway termini.

In step with population growth came an increase in the supply of – and demand for – cultural activities, especially music, as time for leisure pursuits rose and the number and types of people able to afford them swelled dramatically. So whereas in Ella's youth the face of London music was a seasonal splurge of opera and concerts, mostly on specific weekdays between March and July in the small area of the West End and servicing the aristocracy and high society, by his old age it had become an almost year-round, over-stuffed bazaar of musical events, accessible to men and women from all walks of life (both those able to pay for their ticket and those attending the free Sunday concerts 'for the people'), in suburbs and centre alike. The concert repertoire had grown too, embracing the music of Rossini, Mendelssohn, Schumann, Schubert, Berlioz and eventually Wagner, to whose Festspielhaus in Bayreuth Ella journeyed in 1876. More broadly, mindsets and value systems regarding music and culture were shifting, as were attitudes towards social hierarchies, gender, education, travel and communications. These were times of change indeed, and they envelop much of the narrative; a few chapter sections focus on contexts.

The book's range of secondary references draws on established work in mainstream urban and social-economic history and the relatively new, socially oriented strand of music history for nineteenth-century Britain. Historical thinking that has guided this study includes: on the music side, Cyril Ehrlich's *The Music Profession in Britain since the Eighteenth Century* and his *First Philharmonic*, the latter important for signalling the crucial role of the enabler and for its methodology for writing concert history; on the cultural history side, T. C. W. Blanning's

<sup>18</sup> Roy Porter, *London: a Social History* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 207.

<sup>19</sup> Figures from *The London Encyclopedia*, ed. Ben Weinreb and Christopher Hibbert (London: Papermac, 1983), 613–14.

writings on the ‘sacralizing’ of culture in the public spaces (galleries, concert halls) of modern Europe; and for social history, David Cannadine’s work on the British aristocracy, and F. M. L. Thompson’s *The Rise of Respectable Society*, with its emphasis on social emulation and self-respect as significant Victorian values, and its avoidance of rigid class stereotypes. Underpinning much of the work is the idea that musical activities and values are socially and culturally defined, and the notion, derived from the influential work of the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, of Ella’s chamber concerts functioning both as symbols of social identity and distinction for its audiences, and as ‘embodied cultural capital’. What makes all this so pertinent for a Victorian music history is that this was an era when a deep-felt love of music, and a desire to cultivate and appreciate it, were nothing out of the ordinary, and an era when chamber music came to be defined throughout Europe as a repertoire with an intrinsic, aesthetic value that separated it from the more everyday elements of life, and one that challenged the human spirit and intellect. Also germane to the century was an emerging ideology of a hierarchy of composers and compositions, with certain pieces of art music repeatedly judged demonstrably more complicated in their design and more challenging in their expressive palette than others.<sup>20</sup> The desire to explain what made particular pieces of music so great, through an exploration of how a chamber work was constructed, was central to Ella’s activities, and it gives this social history of music an important aesthetic dimension.<sup>21</sup>

Perils and pitfalls bedevil any exploration of Ella’s long and unusual life and achievements. To those already mentioned could be added the difficulty of writing about performers and performances in the era before recorded sound, or the danger that, in putting the case for the neglected hero, the biographer, through subtle manipulation of language, over-blows the trumpet. Conviction and enthusiasm come easily; one can but proceed with caution and candour. Moreover, one can, by juxtaposing contradictory evidence in the sources – particularly the gap between what Ella might say in print and what he might admit privately to his diary or to friends – tease out some of the inconsistencies in his psyche.

**I**N the book’s opening chapters, Ella’s formative influences and experiences, his motivations and his achievements are explored with a view to explaining how

<sup>20</sup> These questions have been much discussed in recent musicology. See, *inter alia*, Katharine Ellis, ‘The Structures of Musical Life’, *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, ed. Jim Samson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 343–70, at 347–55.

<sup>21</sup> On the case for considering the aesthetic within social-cultural histories of music’s sacralization, see Locke, ‘Music Lovers’.

he rose from an anonymous and lowly social position to hold a position of cultural authority within wealthy metropolitan society. Amidst all this is an ongoing need to distinguish between the ordinary and the extraordinary in the historical context, in order to understand, for example, how it was that his successful social advancement set him apart from most of the orchestral musicians whose drudgery he had once shared; and why putting on concerts was nothing unusual, but making a healthy profit from them was. From Chapter 3 onwards the book draws out continuities and discontinuities in the Musical Union's social, economic and artistic history while also analysing Ella's skill as a concert promoter and establisher of musical values, and the curious interplay between the two roles in a commercially driven environment. Emphasis is placed on his unique modes of taste-shaping, including his creation of an ethos of sacralized high culture and social-artistic élitism at the Musical Union – what Cobbett described as 'not only the aristocracy of [social] rank but [...] the aristocracy of music [...] and the aristocracy of executive art'.<sup>22</sup> Issues of audience identity and behaviour are integral to this narrative, which consequently develops broader themes of class, social respectability, gender and taste.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the Musical Union is compared with the Monday and Saturday 'Popular' Concerts, a series of similar eminence and longevity, which shared the same venue for more than twenty years, but which famously – and in contrast to Ella's élite audience – drew what became known as the 'shilling' public and operated on much bigger, business-like lines. Part of the aim here is to illuminate the apparent paradox of the 'aristocratic' Musical Union thriving at a time of wide 'democratization' of art-music concerts in London, and to point up how the emerging changes to concert life impacted on Ella's activities.<sup>23</sup> The book's later chapters also see Ella attempting to expand his influence, trying fresh initiatives, which he glosses with lofty titles, such as the Musical Winter Evenings, the Musical Union Institute and the Società Lirica.

The concluding chapter draws Ella's story to a close, and seeks to understand his achievements, posthumous reputation and significance to music history. It considers the extent to which the Musical Union's metropolitan location and social identity, and/or Ella's skills and limitations, contributed to the institution's success and ultimate demise. It also assesses how influential and typical the Musical Union was in the broader context of British and European musical culture, particularly as regards its social profile and its establishment of listening practices that instilled veneration for the chamber repertoire.

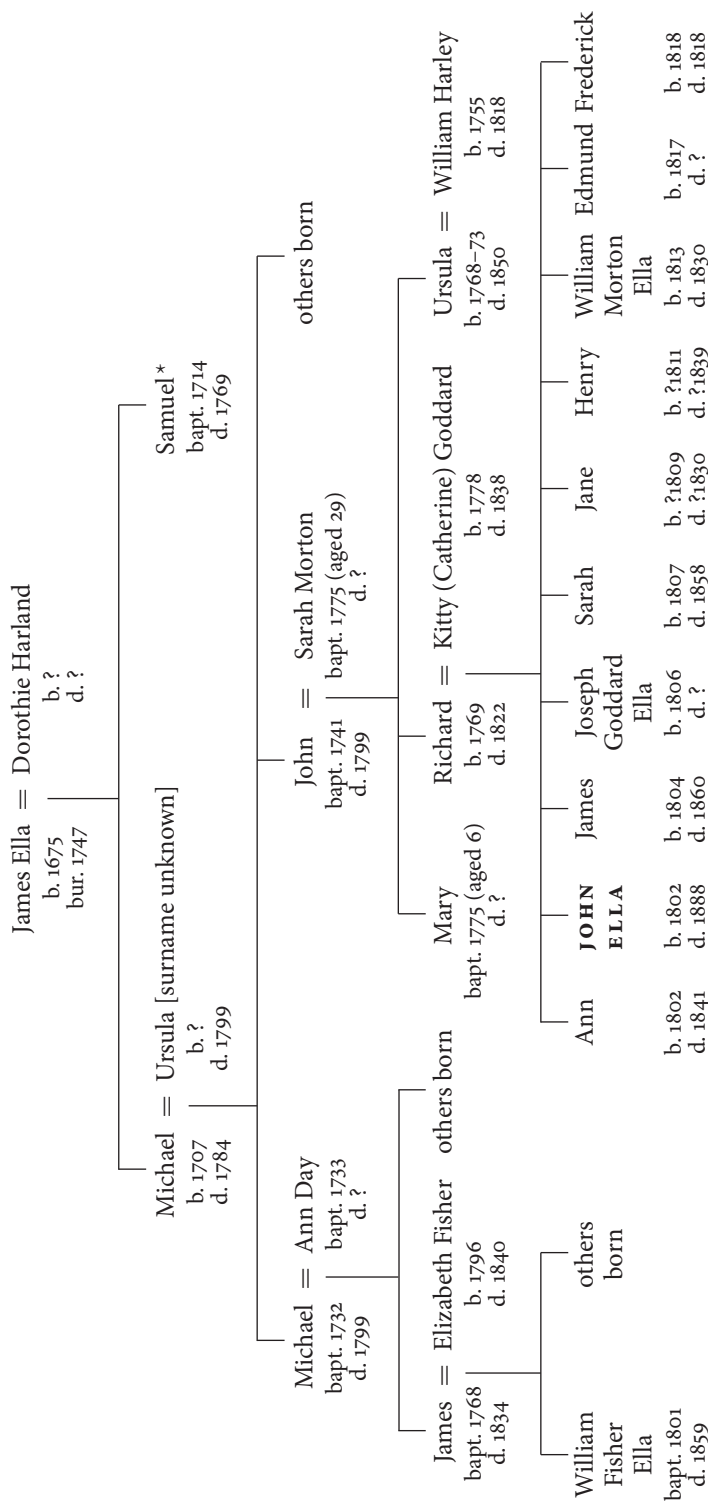
<sup>22</sup> 'Musical Union', *CCSCM*.

<sup>23</sup> The phrase 'democratization of music' is used throughout the narrative to refer simply to the opening up of music to the lower social orders.



While the book's title alludes to Ella's lifelong, personal pursuit of high culture, it also signals his actions and agendas in promoting the 'best music' among London audiences, and his unswerving mission to persuade others to pursue high culture with similar commitment and dedication. The use of the term 'Victorian' in the book's subtitle and narrative is intended primarily to evoke a broad time-frame for chamber music concerts during Ella's lifetime (1830s to 1880s), although I have tried to remain alive to the problems inherent in the use of 'Victorian' as a qualitative adjective, which extend far beyond its coupling with 'music' and the derisive stereotypes that have been perpetuated on the back of it. However, many of the multiple meanings and contradictions that historians have identified within the people and the period strongly resonate in Ella and his associates; and I hope this 'Victorian-ness' will ultimately be a source of fascination to readers.

# JOHN ELLA'S FAMILY TREE




\* For this line of descent, and further details of other family members' birth, baptism, marriage etc., see Raymond E. O. Ella's construction of the Yorkshire branch of the family tree from the seventeenth century (copy in EllaC, ms 159).

## CHAPTER 1

### From Leicester to London, 1802–29

**I**N an era when professional musicians – that is, those who earned their living through music – were often born into families of the same, the conditions surrounding the birth and childhood of John Ella seem distinctly unusual. He was born on 19 December 1802 in Leicester, to a confectioner and his wife, Richard and Kitty (Catherine) Ella, and at least initially was intended for his father's trade.<sup>1</sup> How and why, given these circumstances, he came to prosecute music and, later on, to move in high London society; what marks were left on him by the events of his childhood and youth; and why he later chose to suppress some of his family connections, while vaunting others, are among the intriguing questions his life story poses – a story that must therefore start with his family's social background.

#### *Leicestershire beginnings*

*It was [...] at Dolby [sic] Hall that I first heard Beethoven's trios,  
Haydn's and Mozart's sonatas*  RMU (1859)

*Walked on the Ashby Road – & saw on the Hill, Burleigh Hall, where  
I once passed some agreeable days, in my youth[,] fiddling with old  
Miss & D<sup>r</sup>. Tate – Trios by Kalkbrenner –*

 Ella's diary, 8 November 1853

**T**HE Ellas had their origins in Yorkshire, in the north of England, right back to Saxon times, but in the eighteenth century part of the family went south, presumably in search of better prospects.<sup>2</sup> John Ella's father, Richard Ella (1769–1822), moved to Loughborough, not far from Leicester, in 1774, while still a

<sup>1</sup> Not born at Thirsk, as J. A. Fuller Maitland stated in his entry on John Ella for *DNB* (1889), following the obituary by T. L. Southgate (*MS*, 6 October 1888, p. 213). On this point, see John Ravell, 'John Ella, 1802–1888', *M&L*, 34 (1953), 93–105.

<sup>2</sup> The notable family history has been documented by Raymond E. O. Ella in his *Four Anglian Kings of Northumbria (or Four Yorkshire Anglo-Saxon Crowns)*, 2nd edition (Otley: Northern Line Design, 2002). Yorkshire was part of Northumbria at this period. Raymond E. O. Ella's construction of the Yorkshire branch of the family tree since the seventeenth century (copy in EllaC, ms 159), and other privately communicated information, has provided much background data for this section.

child.<sup>3</sup> Richard was taken there by his mother and father (also a John, and a farmer) at the suggestion of Michael Ella, his father's enterprising brother, who had already settled in the town and was trading as an innkeeper, later establishing a successful business in canal boats – the new and growing means of transporting goods around the country.<sup>4</sup> Richard's father soon found work in the area, and Richard himself learned through apprenticeships his trade as a baker.<sup>5</sup> By 1796 Richard Ella was set up in Leicester, taking on his own apprentices; and by 1800, possibly earlier, he was living and working in the Market Place, in the centre of the town (Fig. 2).<sup>6</sup> His marriage to Kitty, daughter of a local man, Joseph Goddard, probably a carpenter, came in February 1801. Within two years she had given birth to two children, Ann (January 1802) and our John Ella (December 1802); several others followed.<sup>7</sup> Like their ancestors, they were baptized into the Anglican faith,

<sup>3</sup> A settlement certificate, finalized 31 January 1774 (LRO, DE 1834/1/10), confirms that the family moved to Loughborough from Kir[k]by Knowle in the North Riding.

<sup>4</sup> John Ella senior is described in the settlement certificate as a 'yeoman' (implying someone owning land) and in the apprenticeship records for his son Richard as a 'farmer' (see *Register of the Freeman of Leicester*: ii: 1770–1930, ed. Henry Hartopp; Leicester: Corporation of the City of Leicester, 1933, p. 466). Further detail on him and other family members is in Appendix v.

The terms of Michael Ella's will (LRO, PR/T/1799/62/1–2) show how successful he was in enterprise, bequeathing his commercial interests, land and property to his sons, and sharing £2,000 among his daughters. Two generations later, our John Ella would show similar business instincts.

<sup>5</sup> Richard Ella began a series of apprenticeships in 1784. In 1796, on completing a seven-year term, he was made a freeman of Leicester. (Hartopp, 1770–1930, 466 and 76.)

<sup>6</sup> Hartopp (1770–1930) shows that Richard Ella was training apprentices in Leicester, first in bakery and later in confectionery, from December 1796. The poll book for the 1800 election (he was entitled to vote, courtesy of his freeman's status) lists him as a baker in the Market Place: see *A Copy of the Poll [...] Taken in the Borough of Leicester [...] 1800* (Leicester: Ireland & Son, 1801).

<sup>7</sup> According to notes made by John Ella in later life (EllaC, ms 88/vi), there were ten children: six boys and four girls. By 1822 one of the children had died, to judge from the inscription on Richard Ella's gravestone at St Martin's Cathedral, Leicester, which records nine offspring. Baptismal and burial records of St Martin's Church show there were in addition to Ann and John: James (b. 1804), Joseph Goddard (b. 1806), Sarah (b. 1807), William Morton (b. 1813), Edmund (b. 1817) and Frederick (b. 1818), a child who died in infancy – a total of six boys and two girls. The baptism of Henry (b. 1811), a brother who went to India, has not been located; nor has that of a sister, Jane (b. Leicester 1809; d. [place unknown] 1830, according to the *International Genealogical Index*).

### Disclaimer:

Some images in the printed version of this book are not available for inclusion in the eBook.

To view the image on this page please refer to the printed version of this book.

- <sup>2</sup> The Market Place, Leicester, in the eighteenth century. From Mrs T. Fielding Johnson, *Glimpses of Ancient Leicester, in Six Periods* (Leicester: Clarke & Satchell, 1906).

John's ceremony taking place on 23 December 1802 in St Martin's Church, Leicester, not far from the Market Place: the family lived in quarters that were attached to – probably above – the shop.<sup>8</sup>

These were humble beginnings, but as a freeman of the borough Richard Ella had a certain status within the community and collected rates for the local parish.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, like many of his social group he seems to have aspired to improve his family's prosperity and prospects. By 1804 he had risen to become a confectioner, rather than a mere baker of bread,<sup>10</sup> and a few years later was advertising his fine

<sup>8</sup> The shop was located in the narrow lane, then called the Backside (or Cornwall), to the south of the Corn Exchange.

<sup>9</sup> See n. 5 above. Richard Ella is listed as one of the overseers of the tax in some of the extant rate books for St Martin's parish (in which the Market Place was located) at this period, and seems to have taken his turn at collecting the monies. The books for October 1809 and May 1810 (LRO, 21D51/2/4 and 21D51/2/6) were his.

<sup>10</sup> Hartopp (1770–1930) indicates a shift from apprentices assigned to Richard Ella the baker (1796, 1797) to Richard Ella the confectioner (1804). In the 1800 poll book he is listed as a baker. From January 1808 he advertised as a maker and seller of cakes in the *Leicester Journal*, and in 1815 he was listed as a confectioner trading in the Market Place in *The Leicester Directory containing a General List of the Merchants, Tradesmen, Manufacturers, and Principal Inhabitants of Leicester* (Leicester: J. Fowler, 1815).

cakes and other delicacies to the 'Ladies and Gentlemen of Leicester and its vicinity' in the local press.<sup>11</sup> In this artisan-shopkeeper's milieu, on the cusp between the lower-middle and working classes, John Ella and his brothers and sisters grew up, doubtless witnessing commercial practice and the wooing of customers on a daily basis, and learning the importance of deference, respectability and hard work to social advancement. They were never as well off as their upwardly mobile cousins the Harleys in Loughborough (Richard's sister Ursula had married a local brewer, William Harley).<sup>12</sup> Nor could they come anywhere near the affluence and social status of their more distant relatives the Fisher Ellas in the Leicestershire village of Wymeswold. (James Ella, son of the go-ahead Michael Ella, had married into the Fisher family, recent purchasers of an old estate there, and became squire of Wymeswold Manor.)<sup>13</sup> But the Ellas of Leicester, including young John, must have gathered an appreciation of such fine living, albeit at a distance.

Unfortunately, few events of John Ella's childhood and youth are documented in detail, Ella being later concerned to repress information about his modest family origins, and much of what passed in his early years must remain circumstantially argued and imagined. Even so, it seems that the conditions of his Leicester upbringing brought particular benefits of education, training and exposure to music which, had he grown up elsewhere, a boy of his social status might never have encountered. His schooling is a case in point, a clue to the nature of which is provided by one of his friends in old age, the Rev. Hugh Haweis, who in a short biographical account of Ella in the 1880s wrote that Ella had told him that 'when a lad he got a prize for his paintings in water-colours, and distinguished himself in Latin'.<sup>14</sup> Both achievements are corroborated by the survival of a couple of botanical watercolours that he painted at the age of eleven, and by what we know of Ella's facility with language in later life and his propensity for classical references.<sup>15</sup> Given that he was born in an age when compulsory, free primary education for all

<sup>11</sup> *Leicester Journal* (29 December 1815) [advertisement for 'Twelfth Day Cakes'].

<sup>12</sup> An indication of the Harley wealth is signalled in William Harley's will (LRO, PR/T/1818/82), dated 1816, in which he bequeathed £2,000 to his son Edward, and £500 each to his other three children.

<sup>13</sup> James Ella's son, William Fisher Ella (John Ella's second cousin), inherited considerable wealth and land (see James Ella's will; LRO, PR/T/1834/54). He carried the title 'Lord of the Manor', which referred to the ownership of land, including manorialship rights, but did not connote peerage or parliamentary privileges – unlike the aristocrats with whom John Ella would fraternize many years later.

<sup>14</sup> *Haweis*J, 2.

<sup>15</sup> The pictures, signed by Ella and dated 22 June 1814 and 25 April 1814 respectively, are in EllaC, MSS 75 and 76.

English children had not been contemplated, the fact that Ella received an education at all may seem quite remarkable, the more so that it involved a training in Latin. However, many shopkeepers in the English ‘petite bourgeoisie’, concerned for their family’s future prospects and respectability, looked to schooling for their children as a way of insuring against bad times ahead, and providing opportunities for social betterment.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, skills in foreign language would later set Ella apart from many of his musical contemporaries.

In the early nineteenth century Leicester was a sizeable Midlands town, growing apace. In 1801 its population was nearly 17,000, four times larger than its biggest neighbour in the county, Loughborough; by 1821 it had almost doubled, as people migrated in from the surrounding countryside.<sup>17</sup> Like many urban centres in England’s rapidly industrializing economy, it had manufacturing, but this was founded on stockings and still mostly organized as cottage industry in people’s homes or in workshops, not in the large factories that were the more typical symbol of urban growth at this period.<sup>18</sup> The town also had its wealthy middle classes and local gentry, along with a social, cultural and intellectual life, much of which was animated by a group of Nonconformists, leaders of the town’s industry and commerce.<sup>19</sup> Accordingly, for a town of this size and local importance, there was a range of private schools and academies (some boarding, some day schools – the existence of up to thirty boys’ schools has been traced in the first two decades) catering for both those who desired a fashionable education for their sons and, to a lesser extent, daughters (who learned dancing, music, languages, drawing, painting and so on), and those, typically tradesmen, who wanted a more commercial training for young men (English, mathematics, book-keeping, for example).<sup>20</sup>

We do not know which school(s) Ella attended; but we might imagine that Ella’s

<sup>16</sup> For further discussion, see Geoffrey Crossick, ‘The Petite Bourgeoisie in Nineteenth-Century Britain: the Urban and Liberal Case’, *Shopkeepers and Master Artisans in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, ed. Geoffrey Crossick and Heinz-Gerhard Haupt (London: Methuen, 1984), 62–94, at 79–81.

<sup>17</sup> Statistics from Zena Crook and Brian Simon’s essay ‘Private Schools in Leicester and the County, 1780–1840’, *Education in Leicestershire, 1540–1940: a Regional Study*, ed. Brian Simon (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1968), 106.

<sup>18</sup> In the mid-nineteenth century all this would change: factories would appear and other industries (bootmaking, light engineering) emerge; see Colin D. B. Ellis, *History in Leicester, 55BC–AD1976*, 3rd edition (Leicester: Information Bureau, 1976), 104.

<sup>19</sup> For instance the Literary Society and the Adelphi Society, both established by the publisher and radical Richard Phillips, a locally born man who had been educated in London; Crook and Simon, ‘Private Schools’, 109–10.

<sup>20</sup> Crook and Simon, ‘Private Schools’, 111–13, 118.



parents found the money to send their boy to an institution such as the private day school in Applegate (established 1807), where subjects were charged for *pro rata* (6d a week for reading; 1s a week for elocution), and 'drawing and Latin' were on the curriculum; or to the Silver Street academy, run by Henry Carrick, which offered practical study for 'those destined for a commercial life'.<sup>21</sup> Equally, it is possible that John attended the locally endowed Free Grammar School, the building of which still stands in the aptly named Free School Lane in the 'old town' district. It so happened that Richard Ella, having served a seven-year apprenticeship to a baker who was a Freeman of Leicester, was himself entitled, according to statutes dating back to the sixteenth century, to be 'made free'. Freeman's status – effectively bringing membership of the local guild of merchants – was conferred on him in 1796 and gave him both the right to trade in the borough and to send his sons to the locally endowed Free Grammar School once they reached the age of seven.<sup>22</sup> Here Ella would have gained a solid grounding in English, Latin, Greek, Writing and 'Accompts' [i.e. accounts] – a strong ability in the latter undoubtedly became one of his hallmarks later in life.<sup>23</sup> Whether Ella took up his place, to be followed by his younger brothers, we do not know, since no registers or records of the school's pupils survive from this period (1809–16), and in any case the school was in serious decline from about 1802, with only a handful of free scholars – out of the several who were eligible – in attendance.<sup>24</sup> But if he did attend, it seems likely that his father would have had to pay something towards the privilege – by 1816 boys 'on the Foundation' were being charged a guinea on admission and a fee of two guineas per annum.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Crook and Simon, 'Private Schools', 113, 111.

<sup>22</sup> *Register of the Freemen of Leicester: i: 1196–1770*, ed. Henry Hartopp (Leicester: Corporation of the City of Leicester, 1927), p. xx. Sons could be sent to school 'without payment'.

<sup>23</sup> Nicholas Carlisle, *A Concise Description of the Endowed Grammar Schools: i: Bedford-Lincoln* (London: Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1818), 771. Carlisle notes that a child had to be 'capable of reading correctly a Chapter in the Testament' before being admitted, so Ella would have had to have had some rudimentary schooling.

<sup>24</sup> Brian Simon, 'Local Grammar Schools, 1780–1850', *Education in Leicestershire*, ed. Simon, 130–55, at 137–8. Carlisle's *Concise Description* (p. 774; the survey was compiled in 1817) records that it was 'in the remembrance of many persons now living that this School was filled with the sons of Freemen, to the number of three hundred'. *The Victoria History of the County of Leicester: iv: The City of Leicester*, ed. R. A. McKinley (Oxford University Press, for University of London, 1958), 332, states that in 1816 there were just fourteen free scholars and no private boarders. The school closed in 1841.

<sup>25</sup> Carlisle, *Concise Description*, 772. The two guineas were 'in lieu of Potation money, as has been usual heretofore'. The school's rules were articulated in 1816.

In 1817, aged fourteen, John Ella began an apprenticeship to his father in the confectionery trade, and around the same time may well have started to earn money as a musician in the locality too.<sup>26</sup> Precisely how he came to acquire his skills as an instrumentalist – seven years later he would claim to be proficient on the violin, cello and piano – is unclear.<sup>27</sup> He possibly received some tuition from a local music teacher, the numbers of whom were increasing in Leicester, as demand for pianos and lessons, for young women in particular, grew.<sup>28</sup> Or, perhaps more likely, he picked up the basic skills much more informally, once provided with an instrument or two: self-teaching was not uncommon.<sup>29</sup> But whatever the source of his elementary learning, it is highly probable that Ella's pursuit of music was subsequently encouraged by the local hosiery manufacturer, avid amateur musician and energizing force in Leicester's musical life William Gardiner (1770–1853), and by the coincidental arrival of a clutch of high-calibre French string players in the town.<sup>30</sup>

Leicester at the turn of the eighteenth century offered a wide array of musical culture and activity, such that could creep into the awareness of a boy like Ella. The town was by no means inconsequential as a county centre for plays, balls and

<sup>26</sup> The date of his apprenticeship to Richard Ella is given in Hartopp, *1770–1930*, 567. In the application for John Ella's membership of the Royal Society of Musicians [RSM], the relief fund established in the early eighteenth century to protect musicians against the misfortunes of ill health and old age, his recommenders (Samuel Lyon, François Cramer and William Knyvett, all senior London musicians) stated – presumably on Ella's authority – that he had 'practised music for a livelihood upwards of seven years'. The application was made in 1824, in time for ballots in August–December, which places his first paid work as a musician in Leicester around 1817. (Archives of the Royal Society of Musicians, London, A322.) Max Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester* (Wymeswold: Heart of Albion Press, 1998), 29, implies that Ella was active as a music teacher in Leicester, but cites no evidence in support of the claim; I have been unable to trace any such activity in newspapers or local trade directories.

<sup>27</sup> The statement about his playing the three instruments is in the RSM application.

<sup>28</sup> Information about Leicester piano teachers comes from Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester*, 29–30. John's sister Ann is also known to have played the keyboard (Mary Kirby, *"Leaflets from my Life": a Narrative Autobiography*; London: Simpkin, Marshall, 1887, p. 33), so presumably the children had access to a piano. On shopkeepers being prepared to invest in music lessons, see Crossick, 'Petite Bourgeoisie', 81.

<sup>29</sup> EhrlichMP, 99.

<sup>30</sup> For a study of Gardiner, see Jonathan Wilshire, *William Gardiner of Leicester, 1770–1853: Hosiery Manufacturer, Musician and Dilettante* (Leicester: Leicester Research Services, 1970). Gardiner's published writings and reminiscences have proved invaluable as sources for historians of Leicester in this period.

concerts, and had its own theatre and fashionable Assembly Rooms. Both were situated in and around the Market Place, scarcely a stone's throw from Richard Ella's shop.<sup>31</sup> Local amateur and imported professional musicians typically came together for festivals and concerts; meanwhile, music was also made by local militia bands and the congregations of the Nonconformist churches, especially the Great Meeting chapel, which was also a 'pivot of the social and intellectual life' enjoyed by many of Leicester's doctors, lawyers and rich hosiers.<sup>32</sup> In fact, in the early nineteenth century much of Leicester's performance activity gathered momentum and a distinctly metropolitan aura. From 1801 to 1815 the theatre company was managed by the Irish actor William Macready, whose son William Charles Macready would become the celebrated tragedian. Macready senior introduced plays, scenery, actors and actresses hotfoot from the capital, and also ran companies in Birmingham, Sheffield, Newcastle and Manchester.<sup>33</sup> Meanwhile, notable singers and instrumentalists tended to stop in the town if touring the provinces, Leicester's convenient position on the English road network being a distinct advantage.<sup>34</sup> The phenomenally gifted opera singer Angelica Catalani, for example, appeared in 1810.<sup>35</sup>

Of particular importance to Ella's story were four French string players, François and Henry Fémy (violinist and cellist), Charles Guynemer and the great Pierre Baillot, a professor at the Paris Conservatoire (both violinists), who visited Leicester between 1814 and 1817, and surely gave Ella a whiff of the consummate skill of French instrumentalists. From at least one of them he eventually took lessons. The first to arrive were the Fémys, who played concertos and chamber music in Leicester Musical Society concerts in 1814; they were followed by Guynemer (1815) and Baillot (1815–16), both of whom led the society's orchestra and displayed their technical skills in concertos. Baillot's visit was a much

<sup>31</sup> A descriptive account of musical activity can be found in Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester*. For more on Leicester's theatrical life, see Helen Leacroft and Richard Leacroft, *The Theatre in Leicestershire: a History of Entertainment in the County from the 15th Century to the 1960s* (Leicester: Leicestershire Libraries and Information, 1986), 15–25. Ella would have been aware of the theatre's work, since his father's shop was used as an outlet for its ticket sales: as noted in a theatrical advertisement in the *Leicester Chronicle* (13 September 1817). It is possible, too, that John Ella may have played along in the theatre's orchestra around this time.

<sup>32</sup> Crook and Simon, 'Private Schools', 106. Gardiner's father, Thomas (1743–1837), was choirmaster of the Great Meeting (Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester*, 7).

<sup>33</sup> Leacroft and Leacroft, *Theatre in Leicestershire*, 17.

<sup>34</sup> Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester*, *passim*.

<sup>35</sup> Leacroft and Leacroft, *Theatre in Leicestershire*, 18.

talked-about event. The *Leicester Journal* critic swooned at his talents, remarking that he ‘led the band with an ardour we never before witnessed’ and saying of his solo-playing that ‘the art with which he illicit[sic] the boldest and tenderest tones, from the violin, is [?]entirely new, and his exertion surpasses every thing we have hitherto heard’.<sup>36</sup> Presumably others concurred – Gardiner described the visit as a ‘carnival of music’ for the town.<sup>37</sup> Ella, in all likelihood, witnessed a good deal of this activity, even if just listening in at rehearsals. Indeed, since Baillot’s musical philosophy would, decades later, become something of a touchstone for Ella, we may well conclude that the beginnings of Ella’s admiration dated from this time.

How all four Frenchmen came to be in Leicester in quick succession is curious, but largely attributable to social networks and the circumstances of time and place. The Fémys arrived with their father Ambroise, a Martinique merchant and amateur violinist, who was making a business call on Gardiner.<sup>38</sup> After work was done, the father apparently joined his sons, both of whom had been schooled at the Paris Conservatoire, to play Beethoven’s ‘serenade trio’ (presumably op. 8) to Gardiner.<sup>39</sup> Gardiner, whose interest in Beethoven’s music was second to none, was enraptured with their playing and musicianship, thereafter almost certainly acting as conduit for the sons’ engagements at the Musical Society. The next arrival, Charles Guynemer, had links with Baillot as both pupil and brother-in-law, having married his teacher’s sister. He had worked in Paris as a violinist.<sup>40</sup> Recently, according to Gardiner, Guynemer had taken up as a French civil servant, collecting taxes in Belgium, but when the defeat of

<sup>36</sup> *Leicester Journal* (5 April 1816).

<sup>37</sup> William Gardiner, *Music and Friends, or Pleasant Recollections of a Dilettante*, 2 vols. (London: Longman, Orme, Brown & Longman, 1838), 507. Gardiner was, it should be said, a fair judge of quality, having experienced professional music-making in London since the 1790s; see Wilshire, *William Gardiner*, 12–13.

<sup>38</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends*, 488–90. François Fémy was a pupil of Kreutzer at the Paris Conservatoire (*FétisB*). In 1816 and 1818 he appeared in performances of chamber music at the Philharmonic Society in London, and a symphony of his was performed there in May 1816 (see Myles Birket Foster, *History of the Philharmonic Society of London, 1813–1912* (London: John Lane, The Bodley Head, 1912), p. 26). John Feltham, *The Picture of London, for 1818* (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme & Brown, [1818]), 276, lists Fémy as an important ‘rising’ composer of symphonies.

<sup>39</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends*, 489.

<sup>40</sup> Evidence of Guynemer’s activity as a performer in Paris is slight. *FauquetS*, 44, 271, states that Guynemer had played in the inaugural concert of Baillot’s quartet series in December 1814.

Napoleon and capture of Paris by the Allies put an end to this employment he set off for England, with a letter of introduction from the celebrated composer and pianist Muzio Clementi.<sup>41</sup> 'A fortnight had not elapsed before I discovered him to be a most accomplished musician', wrote Gardiner years later, explaining how they had come to play string quartets together.<sup>42</sup> Once again, in all likelihood, Gardiner made the introductions to the Leicester Musical Society. The story of Baillot's arrival in the town is less well documented. Having seen the Bourbon Restoration close the Conservatoire (temporarily, as it turned out) in July 1815, Baillot had set off on a European tour, arriving in England in late 1815 and giving concerts in London and a series of provincial centres, including Leicester (December 1815 and spring 1816).<sup>43</sup> Since the Leicester performances were given alongside Guynemer, and Gardiner makes no mention of his own connections with Baillot, we may reasonably imagine it was the combination of family and professional ties that brought the great violinist to the locality.<sup>44</sup>

Unlike Baillot and the Fémys, whose visits were fleeting, Guynemer stayed on in Leicester until 1817, appearing in local concerts and running with his wife a little school to teach dancing, French and music.<sup>45</sup> In the knowledge of this we might speculate that Ella, who by 1823 could count Guynemer among his London acquaintances, got to know the Frenchman during his time in Leicester, and even that he took some lessons from him and his wife.<sup>46</sup> French was, after all, to become the foreign language in which he had most fluency; and it would have been a golden opportunity to learn how to fiddle properly. Admittedly Ella only ever

<sup>41</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends*, 506–9.

<sup>42</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends*, 507.

<sup>43</sup> The Conservatoire reopened in 1816 as the Ecole Royale de Musique. Baillot's tour took him to Belgium, Holland and on to England; see Charles Guynemer, *Essay on Chamber Classical Music* (London: the author, 1846), 6. Guynemer, *Essay*, 6, says Baillot played at Leicester, Birmingham, Liverpool, Manchester and London. The London concerts were at the Philharmonic Society on 26 February, 13 May and 27 May 1816 (Birket Foster, *History of the Philharmonic*); on these dates he played in chamber music performances, supported in several of them by François Fémy on second violin. By November 1816 Baillot was back in Paris, leading his quartet concerts once again (*FauquetS*, 295–6).

<sup>44</sup> In addition to playing solo concertos, Baillot performed duos with Guynemer. Information from advertisements in *Leicester Journal* (22 December 1815 and 22 March 1816).

<sup>45</sup> As advertised in the *Leicester Journal* (19 January 1816 onwards).

<sup>46</sup> Ella's association with Guynemer is indicated by appointments in his diary for 1823 (EllaC, ms 98). The nature of their interaction at this point is unclear; perhaps Ella took lessons from Guynemer, or simply saw him socially.

allowed it to be known that he had learned with François Fémy, from whom he later took lessons in London (another connection seemingly born in Leicester);<sup>47</sup> but that scarcely rules out the possibility of being also taught by Guynemer. In any case he must have had several opportunities to hear the Frenchman play.

Ella's informal musical education was not just about gaining the technical skills of practical musicianship. An equally important core value, almost certainly laid down in these Leicester years, was his love and appreciation of classical music, in particular his admiration for Beethoven, and here the figure of Gardiner emerges once more. Documentary evidence linking Ella with Gardiner in these first decades of the century is sparse, but the key is Ella's admission that he first heard chamber music by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven – a repertoire only gradually becoming known in England – at the Leicestershire country house of the Hon. Mrs Bowater, Old Dalby Hall in the Vale of Belvoir.<sup>48</sup> Since her musical parties are known to have been organized by Gardiner, it seems probable it was he who opened Ella's eyes and ears to this other world, the boy perhaps being taken along to play an inner part in a quartet, perhaps simply to scurry about and help with the practical arrangements. Given these circumstances, the fact that Gardiner was a linchpin of Leicester musical life, that he developed a reputation for encouraging and teaching local musicians of talent (quite possibly ushering Ella towards the French violinists), and that a lot of hard, surviving evidence demonstrates that Ella and Gardiner were well acquainted from the 1820s onwards both in London and Leicester, the conclusion that Gardiner was a mentor and formative influence on Ella seems inescapable.<sup>49</sup> What is more, Gardiner's enthusiasm for Viennese chamber music and his championship of Beethoven were, in the early nineteenth century, almost without equal in England. He had been one of Beethoven's first

<sup>47</sup> As stated in the preliminary pages to *RMU* (1879). The information appeared during Ella's lifetime in *FétisB*, *HaweisJE*, the first edition of George Grove's *Dictionary*, and later in obituaries.

<sup>48</sup> *RMU* (1859), sup., 22. The connection with Mrs Bowater is documented in Gardiner's *Music and Friends, or Pleasant Recollections of a Dilettante*, supplementary vol. (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1853), 142–7. We know, too, that Ella played chamber music in at least one other local country house: Burleigh Hall (diary entry, 8 November 1853, quoted at the head of this section).

<sup>49</sup> Gardiner's reputation for fostering young talent is documented in Wade-Matthews, *Musical Leicester*, 95. On Ella's proximity to Gardiner in London, see *Music and Friends* (1838), 688–90, and entries in Ella's diaries for 21 May 1824 and 3 November 1826 (EllaC, MSS 99 and 101). Their encounters in Leicester can also be traced: see diaries, 8 October 1826, 22 October 1830 and 2 December 1839 (EllaC, MSS 101, 103 and 108).

English advocates, in 1794 playing in a performance of the E♭ string trio op. 3 (a manuscript copy of which had been brought to Leicester in the fiddle case of the Abbé Döbler, chaplain to the Elector of Palatine, who was fleeing the wars in Europe).<sup>50</sup> This was three years before the work was published in London, and on his own admission, the composition, 'so different from anything I had ever heard, awakened in me a new sense, a new delight, in the science of sounds.'<sup>51</sup> A quest to obtain more of Beethoven's music, initially from Germany, began, and heralded a lifetime's enthusiasm for the composer and his works. Gardiner adapted the music of Beethoven, along with passages from Haydn and Mozart, in his own oratorio *Judah* (1821), and actually wrote to Beethoven offering him 100 guineas for an overture to the work.<sup>52</sup> By 1817 he owned, and had presumably attempted, eighty-four quartets by Haydn, sixteen by Mozart and twelve by Beethoven.<sup>53</sup> Of course, Gardiner's activities need to be understood as part of the wider and remarkably rapid journey of Beethoven's music to public acceptance and reverence in England during the first three decades of the century. But as yet, in a place like Leicester, such a strong belief in this composer and familiarity with his music would have been unusual; so we must consider that it was through Gardiner that Ella's knowledge of, and devotion to, high serious chamber music, especially Beethoven's, first developed.

<sup>50</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends* (1838), 112–14; (1853), 142–4 [year given as 1793]. See also Geoffrey Syer, 'Beethoven and William Gardiner', *MT*, 128 (1987), 256–8: the Abbé played the violin, Gardiner the viola, and Valentine, a local musician, the cello.

<sup>51</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends* (1853), 143.

<sup>52</sup> He also adapted the three composers' music in his *Sacred Melodies* (published 1812–38). A useful overview of these and other achievements is in Jonathan Wilshire, 'Gardiner, William', *NGDM2*. It was characteristic of Gardiner that he should travel to Bonn for the unveiling of the Beethoven statue in 1845.

<sup>53</sup> Gardiner, *Music and Friends* (1838), 507–8. See also his retrospective remarks on p. 831: 'Many have been the changes in our party through the last fifty years; still we contrive, once a fortnight, to regale our ears with a quartett of Haydn, Mozart, or Beethoven. My oldest musical friend, Mr. Bankart, I still find by my side, with his violoncello; and, with our excellent leader, Mr. Gill, Mr. Graham, and Mr. Scott, we play the whole of Beethoven, except his posthumous quartettes, which we conceive require the penetration of the angel Gabriel to understand.'