

# A PETERHOUSE TREASURE RESTORED: WILLIAM SMYTH AND CONCERT-GIVING IN EARLY 19TH-CENTURY CAMBRIDGE

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On 22 November 1816, a fine new ‘Grand pianoforte’ — over eight feet in length and by the London firm of John Broadwood and Sons, the preeminent European piano-makers of the day — was delivered to Peterhouse as the private purchase of one of the Fellows, Professor William Smyth (m. 1783). In September 2019, this same piano, now meticulously restored, was returned to the College after an absence of over 150 years — a return made possible by the generosity of three Petreans, Dilip Chandra (m. 1965), Fred Shahrabani (m. 1965) and Robin Angus (m. 1974). The instrument is already being hailed as one of the most important English pianos to survive from the early nineteenth century.

The piano has a dual significance. From a specifically Peterhouse perspective, the instrument matters because it was a central part of the college’s musical life from 1816 until well into the early Victorian age — a period when concert-giving within the college enjoyed something of a golden age. In the wider context of European Classical music, the piano’s importance is arguably greater still, because Professor Smyth’s instrument is near-identical to the Broadwood piano owned and used by Beethoven in his later years, and is the best-preserved surviving example of its type.

William Smyth (1765-1849), the piano’s first owner, was a major presence in the intellectual and cultural life of early nineteenth-century Cambridge, and devoted much of his exceptionally long career to making Peterhouse the preeminent centre of music performance within the University. The Liverpool-born son of an Irish banker, Smyth had been educated at Eton and privately, and first entered Peterhouse in 1783. Thereafter, except for a short period in the 1790s when he left Cambridge to work as a private tutor, he lived in the college almost continuously as a bachelor don until 1847, when he finally vacated his rooms at the age of 82, just two years before his death.

Mathematics formed the focus of his undergraduate studies (he graduated as eighth wrangler in 1787); but his learning extended broadly over the fields of classics, history, music, and

literature. Indeed, he first came to national prominence as a poet, with the publication of his *English Lyrics* in 1797, and his verse would later be set to music by no less a figure than Beethoven.

Whig patronage, mediated by a former Prime Minister's son, secured him the Regius Professorship of Modern History in 1807, and, with it, appointment to a college Fellowship. As Professor of Modern History, Smyth's lectures were as notable for their modernity (he was lecturing on the French Revolution barely a decade after the execution of Louis XVI) as for the fact that they took place at all. Smyth was the first Regius Professor of Modern History since the chair's foundation in 1724 to consider that lecturing was any regular part of the job; and while this novel enthusiasm for instructing the young was duly satirized by Gillray, the lectures themselves — with their veneration of the British constitution and use of history as a moral and practical guide for aspiring statesmen — were both popular and influential. When first collected and published in 1840, Smyth's *Lectures on Modern History* were widely admired (not least by Lord Acton), and were almost immediately reissued in an American edition, for the use of students at Harvard.

However, if history was Smyth's profession, it was music that was his love; and during the first three decades of the nineteenth century his rooms at Peterhouse were one of the two 'chief centres' of musical life within the University (the other being the Lodge at Downing, where the Master's wife staged a series of rival concerts). Though the primary audience for Smyth's concerts was the (exclusively male) company of dons and undergraduates, he was notable for also encouraging the attendance of women — as he did, equally unconventionally, at his University lectures. (Appropriately, Smyth was the great-uncle of Dame Ethel Smyth (1858-1944), the woman's suffrage campaigner and one of the most important British composers of the twentieth century.)

One of the women in the audience for Smyth's concerts has provided a first-hand account of what it was like to attend. Mary Ann Kelty (1789-1873), the daughter of a Cambridge surgeon whom Smyth had befriended when she was in her twenties, later recalled the exceptionally high standard of musical performance achieved at Smyth's concerts, and the demands their organizer made of his audience's concentration. As a host, wrote Mary Ann Kelty, Smyth was 'cheerful, social, and welcoming [of] his...guests with a genial pleasantry peculiarly his own.'

I [listened] to the music which he had procured ... for our amusement; and such music was it, too, as is seldom — it may not be too much to say *never* — heard out of the professional parties of the metropolis. And not only good was it as to the performers, but exquisite as to the selection.

In return, Smyth insisted on absolute silence from his audience. Even ‘whispers’ were stilled with a reproving professorial frown. All concert-goers, Mary Ann Kilty observed, were required to learn the lesson ‘that not the faintest sound of a word is permitted while the music is going on’.

Programmes included the quartets of Haydn (1732-1809), the trios of Boccherini (1743-1805), and the piano and violin sonatas of Mozart (1756-1791). Contemporary English composers also figured, with glees (unaccompanied settings for men’s voices in three or four parts) by the Roman Catholic, Samuel Webbe (1740-1816), the organist and choirmaster at the Portuguese Embassy in London; and by John Stafford Smith (1750-1836), the first serious English collector of the music manuscripts of Johann Sebastian Bach (and the composer of the hymn that would become *The Star-spangled Banner*).

However, the contemporary composer with whom Smyth had perhaps the most prominent connection was Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827). At the behest of the Edinburgh music publisher, George Thomson (1757-1851), Beethoven made settings of no less than nine of Smyth’s poems. These appeared respectively in Beethoven’s collections of *Irish Songs* (published in 1814), and his *Scottish Songs*, Op. 108 (published in 1818). Composed for solo voice, male or female, accompanied by violin, cello, and piano, these Beethoven settings were ideally suited to private concertizing, and they almost certainly figured in the programmes for Smyth’s musical evenings. And at the centre of that music-making was Smyth’s magnificent Broadwood piano of 1816: at the time of its purchase, the most technologically sophisticated instrument of its type available in Europe.

The historical significance of this instrument, however, goes well beyond its collegiate connection. Only a few months after Professor Smyth’s Broadwood piano had been delivered to Peterhouse, the head of the firm, Thomas Broadwood (John Broadwood’s son and heir) embarked on a marketing tour of Europe that culminated in August 1817 in a meeting with Beethoven, then at his summer lodgings in Mödling, near Vienna, and at the height of his fame. Unimpressed by the pianos available for Beethoven’s use, Thomas Broadwood resolved to make the composer a gift of one of his own. This Broadwood instrument (serial no. 7362) left the company’s workshops in Great Pulteney Street, Soho, on 27 December 1817, bound for Vienna — an instrument identical in all particulars to that which the firm had provided for Professor Smyth just twelve months earlier. This Broadwood became Beethoven’s principal piano during the years 1818-1825. On it, he composed some of his very greatest works, including the *Hammerklavier Sonata* (1817-18), the final three *Piano Sonatas* (1820-22), and the *Diabelli Variations* (1819-23).

Recapturing the sound-world created by these works as they were first played by Beethoven to his inner circle of patrons and friends is an elusive task. Of the several hundred grand pianos made by Broadwood in 1817, barely half a dozen remain — including Beethoven's own, now in the National Museum of Hungary, Budapest, which is no longer in a playable condition. Others have been extensively modified over the intervening two centuries.

William Smyth's instrument, in contrast, survives with its original keyboard, action, and sounding-board intact: the sweetness and clarity of its treble register perfectly complementing the richness and resonance of its bass. Described by one expert as 'the finest surviving example of a Broadwood piano of its period', it enables the listener to get as close as perhaps is now possible to the sound of Beethoven's late piano works, as his contemporaries first heard them.

With even greater immediacy, it allows today's Peterhouse audience to hear anew the superlative instrument that was the focal point of William Smyth's celebrated concerts in the 1820s; and to reconnect, across the intervening two centuries, with the genial scholar-impresario whose love of music made them happen.

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