

“‘Seraphic Lays’: Thomas Chilcot 1707-1766”

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In connection with the release of a CD  
of Chilcot’s songs by Buddug Verona James

The composer of the *Twelve English Songs* is a shadowy figure about whom almost nothing has been known until recently.<sup>1</sup> New research, published here for the first time, has unearthed many details about his life but in so doing has created equally many puzzling questions.

Thomas Chilcot was the fourth son of John Chilcot, a cordwainer (leather worker) who came to live in Bath in about 1700.<sup>2</sup> Where John Chilcot moved from is not certain, but a number of factors suggest Tiverton as a likely candidate. Firstly, the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Chilcot family was centred around the villages of Tiverton and Witheridge, and the names Thomas, John and William (also the name of Thomas's brother) constantly recur in the Tiverton Chilcots. Secondly, many of the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Tiverton Chilcots were cordwainers, and thirdly, church and organ music was a relevant issue in Tiverton, being the first provincial non-cathedral parish in Britain to install an organ after the Restoration: a matter of intense interest and debate in the area.

John was evidently an established cordwainer, for he became a freeman of the Bath Guild of Cordwainers in 1701 and promptly took an apprentice.<sup>3</sup> By 1711 he was joint master of the Guild. The Guild's records would undoubtedly have answered the question of the Chilcot's original home, but these papers are missing — the first of a long trail of missing documents relating to Chilcot.

The Chilcot family home was in the parish of St Michael, a bustling commercial district which included Walcot Street — where Thomas Chilcot lived as an adult — which contained several tanneries. John and Elizabeth had at least six children: John, baptised at St Michael's in August 1701, William, baptised in January 1703, James and Mary, born in about 1704-6, Thomas, born presumably in 1707 and Joseph, who died shortly after his birth in July 1710. William and James were educated at Bath Charity School, an institution founded in 1711 to teach “real objects of charity ... living in or near the City of Bath”. The school was run by the erudite and musical author Henry Dixon, with whom Thomas Chilcot maintained a lifelong connection. Amongst Dixon's many educational writings was a treatise on the use and abuse of church music, of which no copies have survived. The boys' admission to the school was recorded in the school's Minute Book, which also recorded the childrens' ages. Thomas Chilcot — also educated at the Charity School — was for some reason not recorded in the book, and as his baptism record has also proved elusive we have no other means of establishing his date of birth than that he was apprenticed (presumably at the normal age of 14) in 1721, which suggests that he was born in 1707. John and William followed their father into the cordwainer profession, while James was apprenticed to “Mr Thomas Sheyler Chocolate Man” — a coffee-house owner and charity-school trustee who later was Thomas Chilcot's next-door neighbour.

Thomas himself was apprenticed in July 1721 to Josias Priest, organist of Bath Abbey since 1714.<sup>4</sup> Priest, dismissed in 1715 for “speaking disrespectful words against his [pre]snt

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<sup>1</sup> No new information had been presented between Benjamin Maslen's short article “Thomas Chilcot, a forgotten composer”, *Musical Opinion* (June 1943) 294-295 and the present author's “Thomas Chilcot and his concertos” (PhD dissertation, University of Wales, 1991). For more complete information and references, see the latter.

<sup>2</sup> His wedding to Elizabeth Powell on 4 November 1700 in Widcombe Church is the first reference to the Chilcot family in Bath.

<sup>3</sup> Bath City Chamberlain's Accounts, 1701 (Bath Reference Library)

<sup>4</sup> Priest had been receiving payments for playing the organ at the Abbey since 1711.

Majestie King George” and reinstated nine months later, may have been the grandson of the London dancing master of that name who is attributed with the commissioning of Purcell’s *Dido and Aneas*, or may have been the Mr Priest who was organist of Bangor Cathedral from 1705 to 1708. This was an unusual apprenticeship; either Thomas must have shown great musical promise or have been so useless as a prospective cordwainer that he was put to a trade where he could do little damage.

In the Autumn of 1725, Thomas — now aged 18 — had completed four years of his apprenticeship and was settling down to the routine at the Abbey, which at that time had one of the busiest and best-paid cathedral organist posts in Western England. On Priest’s sudden death, Chilcot in January 1725/6 was unanimously appointed Acting Organist, a post that was confirmed at the end of his apprenticeship period, on 5 August 1728. That the post was never advertised suggests that the Abbey and City had extraordinary confidence in their young apprentice, for the authorities could have afforded at that time to appoint and pay an organist of any calibre, and they were never careless in their deliberations.

The appointment of a young charity-school boy barely half-way through his apprenticeship to a well-paid and respected organist’s post, with full salary to boot, was the first of many extraordinary events by which Chilcot’s career was to progress.

Chilcot’s new post involved leading music at the Abbey as well as music for civic ceremonies — a responsibility that brought Chilcot to the attention of Society. Like Bath’s other musicians, Chilcot gave private music tuition; Chilcot’s clients, however, were taken from the highest circles. He did not advertise his services (in contrast to his rivals) but his pupils were known to have included Lady Elizabeth Bathurst (daughter-in-law of Earl Bathurst, and dedicatee of his 1756 concertos in return for an annuity), the Duke of Beaufort’s family (where Chilcot is said to have first met his future pupil Linley)<sup>5</sup> and the painter Thomas Gainsborough (who subscribed to Chilcot’s last set of concertos, and owed Chilcot £1 6s for music lessons at the time of the latter’s death).

Chilcot became a freemason (normal for musicians at the time) in February 1738, rising with astonishing rapidity to be Grand Master of his Lodge by the following year. Like the Charity School records, the Lodge minutes are frustratingly silent about his age and background, while the Grand Lodge minutes (which might have provided more information) do not begin until just two years after Chilcot’s death. He was also a founder member of the Society of Musicians in 1738, appearing in the list of 226 signatories. The Society’s Archive contains biographical information about members who joined after 1776, but records before this date have unfortunately not been kept. Members were obliged to reside at least part of the year in London and attend London events, something which Chilcot patently did not do, although he remained a member until at least 1755 and possibly for the remainder of his life.

Chilcot’s first publication, a set of solidly Handelian suites, show Chilcot’s remarkable competence as a composer as well as an altogether astonishing level of support from the local aristocracy. Among the subscribers were the titled and the famous, including composers such as Handel, Festing, Roseingrave and Stanley. For the work of a young composer to whom formal training was not readily available, the suites show an astonishing level of

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<sup>5</sup> Beaufort family papers (now held at the Gloucestershire County Record Office) predictably lack accounts that might have referred to Chilcot. A box tantalizingly mis-catalogued ‘music papers’ contains ‘misc. papers’.

accomplishment. Occasional lapses such as a pair of exposed consecutives in the Minuet of the final suite are more than compensated for by the freshness and buoyancy of composition. The most puzzling feature is Chilcot's habitual use of extended binary parallelisms (in which the first third or so of the first half reappears transposed as the first third of the second half; while the closing third or so of the first half is repeated transposed at the closing of the piece). In his concertos, Chilcot developed this construction into an important structural principle by creating a "crux", or point at which the returning tonic tonality coincides with the return of recognisable melodic material to produce a sensation of recapitulation — a prerequisite of "Sonata Form"). Such parallelisms are not systematically used by other composers before the works of Domenico Scarlatti, which were first published in 1738 — four years after Chilcot's *Suites*. Unless Chilcot invented the idea for himself — which in view of his youth and inexperience in the early 1730s seems unlikely — he must have been introduced to the concept by contact with a fellow-composer. Chilcot, however, does not appear to have been absent from Bath for any substantial period after his appointment to the Abbey. The only explanation that comes readily to mind is that contact with the current London music scene was provided by his schoolmaster Henry Dixon, who had formerly worked at St Andrew's, Holborn, and was given study leave to visit London "whenever occasions require ... not exceeding one month, unless some very extraordinary occasion requires a long time".

A decade after the publication of the *Suites*, the *Gloucester Journal* reported that: 'Last WEEK were Publish'd, Dedicated to Samuel Strode, Esq., TWELVE SONGS, With their Symphonies. The Words by Shakespear [sic], and other Celebrated poets, set to Musick, by THOMAS CHILCOT, Organist of Bath. The Subscribers are desir'd to send for their Books'.

The publication is dedicated to that leader of Bath society, Samuel Strode, in terms which suggest that Chilcot had high hopes from Strode's patronage:

To Sam.<sup>l</sup> Strode Esq.<sup>r</sup>

Sir

The great regard you have always shewn for the Polite Arts, particularly that of Musick, will I hope be a sufficient Apology for the Liberty I have taken in prefixing your Name to the following Songs, nor has your Kindness and Humanity left me any Reason to doubt but that the same Benevolence which on all Occasions you shew to Others, and which renders you so conspicuous, will no less dispose you to honour them with your Protection.

There is but one Part of the following Performance, Viz.<sup>t</sup>

the Poetry, that Decency will permit me to commend, and to do this effectually I am persuaded nothing more need be said than that the greater Part of it is Shakespear's; It

is indeed this Consideration that chiefly encourages me to hope for your Patronage, and which affords me the

Satisfaction of thinking that however I might have fared had I ventured to appear alone in the World, I have at this Time done it in so good Company as to insure my self a favourable Reception. The desire of Applause from the many has not been so much my Motive

to this Publication as an Ambition of contributing to the Entertainment of Persons of Taste  
and Discernment: That you are one of that Number, all  
that have the Happiness to know you will confess, and it is therefore in Hopes  
that this Work may afford you some little Amusement in your vacant  
Hours that I presume to subscribe myself

S.<sup>r</sup> Your most humble  
and Obedient Servant  
Thomas Chilcot

The subscribers who were 'desir'd to send for their Books' numbered 278, taking a total of 346 books, so great had been the success of the subscription gathering — making this collection of songs one of the half-dozen most popular musical publications of the decade. The list of subscribers shows Chilcot's influence amongst his fellow musicians, who are prerepresented by Avison, Alcock, Boyce, Burgess, Felton, Festing, Gladwin, Gunn, Handel, William Hayes, Orpin, Stanley, Worgan and numerous organists around the country. John Robinson, organist of Westminster Abbey, took a copy, as did Richard Church of New College Oxford and James Morley of Bristol Cathedral. The organ builder Abraham Jordan (who tuned the organ at Bath Abbey) and the Royal harpsichord maker Joseph Mahoon (who subscribed to every one of Chilcot's publications) appear in the list, together with John Hawkins, William Jackson and several artists such as John Cornish and William Hoare. Society rivals "Beau" Nash and Samuel Strode took four copies each; perhaps it was the former's Cardiff connections that produced subscriptions from James Nooth, organist and "Mr Bowen", both of Cardiff. The volume was published in London by John Johnson, who took 24 copies and sold in Bath by the booksellers Frederick and Leake, who both also sold tickets for Chilcot's concerts in the 1750s.

Amongst those absent from the list is William Smith, publisher of Chilcot's *Suites*, and Henry Dixon; the latter a rather more surprising omission, especially as he had taken two copies of the *Suites*.

The move to the publisher John Johnson was significant. This newly-established publisher (Johnson had set up his sign, the harp and crown, at Cheapside only in about 1740) was already establishing what was to become the foremost music publishing house in Britain after the decline of the Walsh empire. Like Chilcot, Johnson was also a freemason.

The success of the publication can be attributed to two factors: the growing reputation of Thomas Chilcot and his music and the fast-expanding market for collections of songs. Some dozens of song books were published in the years following 1738, due in part to the introduction of vocal music to the main London pleasure gardens. Collections with which Chilcot would have been familiar include the *Two Cantata's*, *And Six Songs* of Barnabus Gunn (1736), John Stanley's *Six Cantata's* of 1742, and various volumes by Henry Carey, including his *The Musical Century* of 1737, to which Chilcot subscribed. 1743 saw the publication of John Alcock's *Twelve English Songs*, with Chilcot among the subscribers.

Like most English songs of the time, Alcock's are set in the 'green fields and gay groves' of Elysium, peopled by lovers called Phyllis, Strephon, and other names familiar from the pastoral tradition. The songs favour the English strophic layout rather than the Italian *da capo* form, and are set for soloist and bass only, with a transposed solo flute part printed small at the foot of each page.

Another set of 'English Songs', published by John Johnson a few years before Chilcot's, was the 'SIX | English Songs | For two & three Voices | Set to Musick by | Mr James Corfe'. These consist of short unaccompanied binary songs. Four of the songs are in major keys and articulate the mediant minor at the central double bar; three of these start the second half in the tonic, and the other in the supertonic minor. The last song is humorous: it ends in the relative minor on the words 'Give us then a cup of liquour, fill it up unto the Brim | for then Methinks my wits Grow Quicker, when my Brains in Claret Swim'.

Chilcot's collection of songs is altogether more substantial than Corfe's or Alcock's. Seven of the songs have texts by Shakespeare and one by Marlowe; these are all in binary form, some of them strophic. The remaining four songs are longer works, in *da capo* form, three of them on texts by Anacreon and one on a text by Euripides. The set follows all the fashions of song collections from the 1740s: the English preference for binary rather than the Italian *da capo* form, the pastoral or boozy texts, the inclusion of Anacreontic verses, and even the occasional appearance of a Scots snap.

Most of the songs, all of which are presented in full score, employ string trio or quartet, but the last song, 'The choir wake', is scored for strings, continuo, two oboes, two trumpets and timpani. The 'fanfare' nature of the orchestral part does not allow Chilcot a great deal of scope for imaginative scoring, but the latter is certainly found in 'Orpheus with his lute' in which pizzicato strings are set off by a lyrical and effective flute part.

During the twenty years following his appointment at Bath Abbey, Chilcot occupied himself with his work there, with raising a family (he married Elizabeth Mills in 1729 and had seven children, of whom four survived, and the wealthy clergyman's daughter Anne Wrey in 1749), and with his two first publications, including the songs now under discussion.

During his last twenty years, Chilcot broadened his horizons and increasingly sought attention in the City's secular life. The fact that this trend coincided with his marriage to his wealthy second wife suggests that it was she that provided both the money and at least part of the motivation for this activity. Newspaper announcements show that Chilcot arranged increasingly elaborate concerts, which, from their size and scope were clearly intended to overshadow all other musical events in the City and to establish the Abbey organist as Bath's principal musician. Chilcot's most substantial works, his twelve concertos, also date from this period; they are described elsewhere.<sup>6</sup>

An anonymous poem (curiously enough emanating from Tiverton) published in *The Bath Journal* on 3 January 1763 refers to Chilcot's playing "...the Organ breathes seraphic Lays", while *Boddely's Bath Journal* on 6 August 1764 carried a similarly-phrased tribute:

When C\_\_\_\_t sits in Paul's great Choir,  
And when his Fingers strike the Lyre,  
What glorious and seraphic sound  
In Flute and Cornet there are found.

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<sup>6</sup> "The twelve harpsichord concertos of Thomas Chilcot" (article by the present author in the press for *The Music Review*); also the present author's "The eighteenth-century British keyboard concerto after Handel", *Aspects of Keyboard Music: Essays in honour of Susi Jeans* (Oxford, 1992), 121-139.

During this period, Chilcot seems to have become increasingly conscious of his own importance and position. He adopted (without authority) a coat of arms, and left a large sum in his will to pay for an elaborate funeral (“... to be buried in a Winding Sheet in a Leaden Coffin to be carried in a hearse and Six Horses to Tawstock attended by our Mourning Coach and which Hearse ... should be dressed with black feathers ...”), for the Minister of Tawstock to “preach a Sermon on Whit Monday in every year for ever ... in memory of me”, for the Sexton of Tawstock to dust the Chilcot memorial, and for public distribution of bread and the education of poor children, all in the name of Chilcot.

The composer died suddenly on 24 November 1766, an event which, given Chilcot’s standing, could have been expected to have been newsworthy. *Pope’s Bath Chronicle* the following Thursday contented itself, however, with the laconic statement “Monday last died, Mr. Chilcot, organist in this city”, sandwiched into the page alongside a rather longer item relating that “Mrs Plunkett ... has taken a house” in the City.

Chilcot’s property, sold by an auction organised by his friend and solicitor William Yescombe, was so substantial that “the great Number of Lots” advertised in *Boddely’s Bath Journal* on 5 January 1767 had to be sold over a three-day period. His estate included a vast library of music and books, which was withdrawn from the sale due to a disagreement that rapidly erupted between Yescombe and Chilcot’s children. The latter alleged that Yescombe was selling Chilcot’s possessions cheaply to his friends: an undervalued horse that Yescombe claimed was “worn out” and “two fine Harpsichords” that the family claimed were worth 100 guineas and sold for 40. More seriously, Yescombe had various manuscripts of Chilcot’s music, and was allowing friends to copy from a manuscript book containing “his finest pieces of Music ... never Printed or Sold”, and by so doing reducing its value. Yescombe replied by withdrawing the music from the sale and asking the composer William Herschel to catalogue the library in order to show that it was of little value. The catalogue of 253 items has recently been discovered by the Yescombe family, and will be the subject of a future article.<sup>7</sup>

Chilcot composed a number of anthems, referred to in newspaper articles, that have not survived. The catalogue of Chilcot manuscripts also refers to “Elfrida” — presumably an oratorio — and to 92 songs in addition to the 14 copies of the “12 Songs”. Was this a mis-written reference to the manuscript for the 12 Songs, or is there a huge treasure-house of Chilcot songs awaiting discovery for Buddug’s next recording?

The disagreement over Chilcot’s estate rumbled on for thirty years, and meant that none of Chilcot’s intentions for a memorial in Tawstock or in Bath Abbey, or for annual sermons, charity distributions or monument dusting, were ever carried out.

Chilcot earns a position both as one of the finest native English composers of the eighteenth century, and as the most mysterious.

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<sup>7</sup> Discovered by Edward Yescombe, to whom I am indebted for permission to use this information.