



William Smethergell, Organist

Author(s): Timothy Rishton

Source: *The Musical Times*, Vol. 124, No. 1684, (Jun., 1983), pp. 381-384

Published by: Musical Times Publications Ltd.

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/964097>

Accessed: 07/04/2008 04:50

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=mtpl>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit organization founded in 1995 to build trusted digital archives for scholarship. We enable the scholarly community to preserve their work and the materials they rely upon, and to build a common research platform that promotes the discovery and use of these resources. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Church and Organ Music

William Smethergell, Organist

Timothy Rishton

Nurse of Art, the City rear'd
In beauteous pride her tower-encircled head;
And, stretching street on street, by thousands
drew,
From twining woody haunts, or the tough
yew
To bows strong-straining, her aspiring sons
(James Thomson, *Autumn*, 113–17)

‘The enormous piles of buildings belonging to the Custom-house line the South side of the way [Thames Street], and by their height prevent a single ray from the Sun ever glancing on the wet and narrow cart-way, and still narrower foot-path. A passenger unaccustomed to the place would, on entering this Street from Towerhill, suppose that Chaos was come again.’¹ The street so described at the end of the 18th century led into the parish of All Hallows Barking by the Tower, a large and ‘generally well-built’ community,² whose impressive church commanded in 1732 annual parish rates of £120.³ An organ had been a feature of the church since Anthony Duddington’s famous instrument of 1519,⁴ but by the mid-18th century a Harris organ of 1675–7 had in its turn been largely rebuilt by Gerard Smith in 1720.⁵ The composer C.J.F. Lampe (son of the better-known J.F. Lampe) was among the 18th-century organists of the church,⁶ and upon the resignation of his successor Samuel Bowyer in 1770 after just one year in office, another composer, the 19-year-old William Smethergell, was among the six candidates for the post.⁷ His election

on 22 November, jointly with the organist and singer Charles Knyvett, was the start of a musical career which, though by no means spectacular, is fascinating for the light it sheds on the activities of a typical late 18th-century London musician.

William Smethergell (son of William, a ‘citizen and poulterer’, and Elizabeth) was baptized at the London church of St Peter-le-Poer on 6 January 1751. At the age of 14, on 1 April 1765, he left his family’s home in Tower Street in the parish of All Hallows Barking to be apprenticed to Thomas Curtis, ‘citizen and weaver’, for the ridiculously large ‘consideration’ of £52.10s.⁸ It was symptomatic of the decline of the apprenticeship system that such large demands were made by mid-18th-century masters; perhaps, suggests Jocelyn Dunlop, in an attempt to stem a flood of incompleting apprenticeships.⁹ Despite the description ‘weaver’, Curtis was in fact a musician. He was organist from 1753 until his death in 1806¹⁰ of St Mildred’s Bread Street (where the well-known Robert Hudson was for a time his assistant), and he generously subscribed for six copies of Smethergell’s keyboard concertos published in the mid-1770s. The Weavers’ Company freedom admission book for 1737–69¹¹ shows how Curtis – and subsequently Smethergell – came to be associated with the Company: ‘Thomas Curtis, living near Hackney Turnpike in the parish of St Matthew Bethnal Green, Organist, Son of John Curtis late Citizen & Weaver of London, deceased, is made

Free by Patrimony on the Testimony of Charles Curtis, Citizen and Weaver of London’ (1 June 1761). Despite Scholes’s assertion¹² that City organists were required to become members of a City Livery company, very few actually appear to have done so.

The Weavers’ Company Court minute book¹³ records Smethergell’s admission to the freedom of the company on 4 May 1772, describing him as a musician living at Tower Dock. Having held his organist’s post at All Hallows for 18 months, Smethergell evidently considered his immediate future to be reasonably secure, for ten days later the following entry was made in the registers of St Giles Cripplegate:

William Smethergell of the Parish of Alhollows Barking London Batchelor & Ann Moore of this Parish Spinster were married in this Church by Licence this Fourteenth day of May 1772 by me [signed] Geo. Goldwyer. This Marriage was solemniz’d between us [signed] Wm Smethergell Ann Moore in the presence of [signed] Wm Gould Elizabeth Gould.

Soon after his marriage he moved to the parish of St Benet’s Paul’s Wharf, where his daughters, Elizabeth and Ann, were born on 16 February 1773 and 24 June 1775 respectively. Both were baptized at St Benet’s, Elizabeth on 18 March 1773 and Ann on 6 July 1775. Ann’s arrival in the Smethergell household was particularly well timed as less than a month earlier, on 26 May, William had been appointed organist of the United Parishes of St Mary at Hill with St Andrew Hubbard, a post he was to hold for nearly 51 years while retaining, in typical pluralist fashion, his position at All Hallows Barking. Although the list of the seven candidates for the post recorded in the church vestry minutes¹⁴ is unimpressive, showing that the position was not highly sought after, it must nevertheless have doubled Smethergell’s income.

If the William Smethergell whose daughter Mary Ann was born in 1796¹⁵ was another child of William and Ann, he cannot have been born until after 1779, in which year the elder William joined the Society for the Support of Decayed Musicians and their Families, the institution to which Handel had left £1000 in his will 20 years earlier and which subsequently

¹ J.P. Malcolm: *Londinium Redivivum* (London, 1802–7), ii, 415

² op cit

³ op cit, 417

⁴ W.L. Sumner: *The Organ* (London, 1973), 106; John Caldwell: ‘Duddington’s Organ: Another Opinion’, *MT*, cviii (1967), 254–5

⁵ Sumner, op cit, 155

⁶ C.W. Pearce: *Notes on Old London City Churches, their Organs, Organists, and Musical Associations* (London, 1909)

⁷ Vestry Minutes, All Hallows Barking (held by the church). I am grateful to Donovan Dawe for permis-

sion to use material on Smethergell’s church appointments from his planned book, *Organists of the City of London 1666–1850*, and for generously supplying other advice and information.

⁸ Inland Revenue apprenticeship records (London, PRO (Kew), MSIR I/24, f.116); Weavers’ Company Court minute book 1765–75 (Guildhall Library, MS4655/17, pt 1)

⁹ *English Apprenticeship and Child Labour: a History* (London, 1912), 194

¹⁰ dates kindly supplied by Donovan Dawe

¹¹ Guildhall Library MS4656/7

¹² *The Great Dr Burney* (London, 1948), 51–2

¹³ Guildhall Library MS4655/17, pt 1

¹⁴ Guildhall Library MS1240/2

¹⁵ Registers of St Mary the Virgin, Aldermanbury, 22 Feb 1796: ‘Mary Ann d. of Wm & Mary Smethergell Born 27 Jan’

became the Royal Society of Musicians of Great Britain. His application, dated 4 July 1779, states that he had 'Profess'd & Studied Music upwards of Seven Years He is Married & has two Children, one 6 & ye other 4 Years of Age. He is Orangist [*sic*] of St Mary Hill, & Allhallows, is First Tenor at Vauxhall & his Teaching & places is about 200£ p. Ann.' He was accepted as a member of the society and signed the admission book on 5 September.¹⁶

By this time Smethergell was becoming increasingly involved in London musical life. In addition to his church appointments he was involved in concert administration¹⁷ and had published his first four major works: six harpsichord lessons op. 1, six keyboard concertos, six overtures op. 2 and six 'canzonets' for violin and keyboard.¹⁸ Among the 107 subscribers to his Six Concertos of c1775 were the music publishers and sellers Robert Bremner, Henry Thoroughgood and Longman & Broderip (taking 12 sets), as well as Mr Johnson, almost certainly the publisher John Johnson of Cheapside. Contemporary London organists are well represented, including among many others James Evance, whose own keyboard concerto was published a decade later; Mr Groombridge, who in 1787 was responsible for the posthumous publication of one of the finest sets of keyboard concertos by any English composer, the six concertos of Thomas Augustine Arne; Edmund Gilding, the organist of St Giles Cripplegate who had perhaps played at Smethergell's wedding a few years earlier; Mary Hudson, who was soon afterwards appointed organist of St Olave Hart Street (Smethergell was not among the London organists listed in Guildhall Library MS858/1 as having contributed towards the cost of building that organ in 1781); John Stanley; and John Worgan, organist at Vauxhall Pleasure Gardens where Smethergell played the 'tenor' (or viola). Smethergell's family does not seem to be

represented except by 'Miss Gould' – a cousin, perhaps¹⁹ – and it seems unlikely that the organist, 'James Moore of Cardiff' would have been related to his wife. His former master, as noted above, was exceptionally generous, subscribing for six sets; he was probably also responsible for the subscription of 'Mr Charles Curtis, Gent' (presumably the 'citizen and weaver' mentioned above).



Charles Knyvett's appointment as joint organist of All Hallows Barking was terminated between 4 April 1782 and 24 April 1783, leaving Smethergell as sole organist. He had become a liveryman of the Weavers' Company in 1781,²⁰ and now, at the age of 32, he was enjoying an unusually large income derived from his teaching, his two church appointments and his activities at Vauxhall, for which he presumably wrote his 12 'overtures', issued in two sets of six of which the second (op. 5) was sufficiently popular to merit a second edition. A fascinating manuscript list of the 'Songs and Instrumental Music Perform'd at Vauxhall 1790 – 1791'²¹ shows, however,

that none of Smethergell's music was performed there between 18 May 1790 and 25 August 1791, nor is he mentioned in any incidental anecdotes about the performers. That his music was known elsewhere is shown by his 'Moggy Macbride, a Favorite Song, Sung by Mrs Forrester, at Islington Spa'. More significant than this weak and trivial ballad is his 'Favorite Concerto for the Harpsichord or Pianoforte' published in 1784. Justly described by Samuel Arnold as one of 'the best of Mr Smethergell's works', which 'shews the author to be far above superficiality',²² its first movement combines a profusion of melodic ideas with a carefully calculated symmetrical design that flanks the long central solo section by a pair of similar tutti-solo-tutti units, of which the solo in the second is a wholesale subdominant repetition of that in the first.

The hundreds of performers in the 1784 Handel Commemoration concerts included among the second violins a 'Mr Smithergale'²³ – an understandable misreading of Smethergell's rather flowery signature (*The Morning Post*, commenting on the concerts, reported that the list of performers was derived from 'the Tickets found in the Box, into which every performer must put his or her name'). He was also one of the thousands of subscribers to Edward Miller's *The Psalms of David* (c1790), of which he bought three copies, but appears to have subscribed to no other publication²⁴ or to have bought anything at either of the great 18th-century London music auctions, the Boyce sale of 1779 or the Stanley one seven years later.²⁵

The following few years saw a reduction in Smethergell's published output, and during the last 30 years or more of his life nothing bearing his name was published. The final decade of the 18th century, when he might have been expected to have enjoyed a high reputation and financial security, saw him living in rented accommodation, expelled from the Society for the Support of Decayed Musicians for non-pay-

¹⁶ I am grateful to Betty Matthews for bringing this to my attention and supplying the quotation.

¹⁷ I am grateful to Dr Owain Edwards of the Oslo Musikkhøgskole for pointing out to me the following newspaper cutting in British Library Theatre Cuttings 41, f.39, cutting no.129: 'By SUBSCRIPTION, For ONE NIGHT ONLY. AT the King's Arms Tavern, Cornhill, Tomorrow will be A CONCERT and BALL. The Music by the best Performers. And the Vocal Parts by Miss JAMESON. W. SMETHERGELL, Steward. Tickets to be had at Longman and Lukey's Music Shop, No.26 Cheapside; and at Thorowgood's Music Shop, at the Royal Exchange, at 5s.3d. each'; a long search revealed that the cutting came from *The Public Advertiser*, 24 Jan 1775.

¹⁸ work-list by Owain Edwards in *The New Grove*

¹⁹ John Gould married William's aunt Elizabeth Smethergell of All Hallows Barking at St Dunstan's-in-the-East on 30 Sept 1743; William and Elizabeth Gould, witnesses to Smethergell's marriage, were presumably their children.

²⁰ Weavers' Company quarterage book, 1818–30 (Guildhall Library MS4661/107), 26 June 1781

²¹ now MS S513 14/267, Minet Library, Camberwell; for a description see Charles Cudworth: 'The Vauxhall "Lists"', *Galpin Society Journal*, xx (1967), 24–42

²² *European Magazine and London Review*, vi (Aug 1784), 136; I am grateful to Dr Jamie Croy Kessler for bringing this to my attention.

²³ Charles Burney: *An Account of the Musical Performances . . . in Commemoration of Handel* (Dublin, 1785), 19

²⁴ kindly confirmed by Peter Wallis, director of the Project for Historical Bibliography at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne

²⁵ I am grateful to Leeds Public Library for allowing me access to their copy of the Boyce Auction Catalogue and to J.P.W. Cochrane of Christie, Manson & Woods Ltd for searching their archives for me.

ment of subscription, and working in relative obscurity, without a mention in any London professional directories apart from Doane's *Musical Directory for the Year 1794*. When his two daughters were married – in successive ceremonies on Sunday 29 January 1792, at St Mary the Virgin, Aldermanbury – Smethergell was living at 55 Aldermanbury, in the same parish as William and Mary, the parents of Mary Ann Smethergell mentioned above. Doane gives Smethergell's address in 1794 as 7 Bull Head Court, off Newgate Street, but the rate and sewer rate books for Farringdon Ward are frustratingly unhelpful in documenting Smethergell's presence there.

There are many examples of organists' longevity, but Smethergell was exceptional in this. He retained his post at All Hallows Barking until 1 May 1823, when he retired with an annuity of 20 guineas, to be deducted from his successor's salary (an amendment that sought to reduce his pension to 20 pounds was defeated at a general vestry meeting). His successor, Miss Mary Morrice – apparently the daughter of the parish clerk – was elected in a remarkable contest on 10 June, unanimously chosen from a field of eight contenders by the 117 voting parishioners.

The vestry minutes of St Mary at Hill with St Andrew Hubbard for 30 March 1826²⁶ record that:

The advanced age and long services of Mr. W. Smethergill [*sic*] having been taken into consideration It was Resolved that (subject to the approbation of the United Parish) he should be allowed to resign the Office of Organist and to retire on his Salary of £30 p. Annum and to receive in addition the annual sum of £6 which has been paid to him for teaching the Children to sing.

The ten candidates who subsequently stood for the post were each required to play 'Haydn's Chorus "Let us break their bonds asunder"' and a Verse of the Old Hundredth Psalm', on the strength of which Miss Hannah Forge was unanimously elected on 30 May. Curiously, one of the other candidates was the 15-year-old Samuel Sebastian Wesley who only two months earlier had been appointed to the first of his many church and cathedral appointments: organist at St James's Chapel, Hampstead Road. The parish accounts of St Mary at Hill²⁷ show that Smethergell's pension was paid in quarterly £9 instalments (Midsummer, Michaelmas, Christmas and Lady

Day) up to Christmas 1835. By March 1836 Smethergell was dead. The Weavers' Company quarterage book of 1830–44²⁸ records his last address as 74 Bishopsgate Without.

William Smethergell is a curious, but not altogether untypical, case of promise unfulfilled. While some of his works – the keyboard concertos in particular – display an imagination and musicianship far above that of most of his English contemporaries, he was perfectly capable of writing lifeless and insipid music. Perhaps it was the realization that the latter was as much in demand as the former in the torpid musical environment of early 19th-century England that prompted Smethergell to give up composition and retire into an obscurity from which he has never returned.

²⁸ Guildhall Library MS4661/108

In addition to the acknowledgments made in footnotes, I am very grateful to Miss L. Collins, Lady Jeans and Mr John Wagstaff for their advice and assistance; also to the staff of the Henry Watson Music Library, Manchester, and the British Library, the Guildhall Library and the Public Record Office in London for their generous cooperation.

Smethergell's 'Favourite Concerto' will be played by Timothy Rishton with the Redlands String Trio in the Tadley Concert Series at St Mary's, Tadley, Hants on 11 June.

²⁶ Guildhall Library MS1240/3, f.137

²⁷ Guildhall Library MS3885/35–43

ORGAN SCHOLARSHIPS

of £100.00 p.a. tenable normally for three years are offered each year by Cambridge Colleges for candidates who are able to take a University course.

Election to a Scholarship usually qualifies the scholar for an L.E.A. grant.

The duties (differing from College to College) mainly involve accompanying choral services in College Chapel, taking choir-practices, and playing a substantial part in College secular music-making.

The experience is especially useful for those contemplating a professional career.

The Colleges this year offering organ scholarships to be taken up in October 1984 are: (for both men and women) **Christ's, Clare, Corpus Christi, Emmanuel, Girton, Gonville and Caius, Jesus, Magdalene, St Catherine's, St John's, Selwyn, Sidney Sussex, Trinity and Trinity Hall**; (for men only) **Peterhouse**.

The Examination is to be held in Cambridge 21-24 September 1983. The closing date for applications is 1 September 1983.

The tests will include the playing of the Adagio and Fugue from the Toccata Adagio and Fugue in C major by J. S. Bach, and (for short-listed candidates) the first movement of Mendelssohn's fourth Organ Sonata, in B flat.

For further details, enquire of the Secretary of the Organ Scholarships Examination, Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge.