

Christina Bashford. 2007. *The Pursuit of High Culture: John Ella and Chamber Music in Victorian London*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell.

Reviewed by Ruth A. Solie

Christina Bashford has titled and subtitled her new book appropriately: although it takes the overt form of a biography of Victorian musical entrepreneur John Ella, it is also a much broader project concerning musical life, repertory, and audiences in nineteenth-century Britain. On the side, she is eager to dispel the lingering reputation of Victorian Britain as “the land without music,” showing again and again how the success of Ella’s career demonstrates his society’s widespread and wildly energetic musical interests.

John Ella was born in Leicestershire in 1802, the son of a baker. Bashford argues that this experience of successful mercantile origins remained important for him lifelong, providing both business sense and shrewd marketing instincts that served his entrepreneurial ambitions very well. Ella began making a living as a violinist in London when the large-scale shift of “high culture” toward middle-class accessibility had not yet begun, and he understood well that success would depend on the judicious cultivation of aristocratic connections. His first organizational endeavor was the formation of a kind of club to play chamber music at the home of Lord Saltoun, an enthusiastic amateur, and his confidence in such well-placed allies remained with him throughout his career. Bashford discusses with considerable insight the awkward social situation in which British musicians found themselves, needing delicacy enough to interact effectively in a fairly intimate manner with members of the aristocracy and gentry without presuming upon their own lesser class status.

What is especially interesting is that Ella’s lifelong habit of continental travel began so early—in the 1820s he spent time in Paris, studying with Fétis and acquiring the beginnings of his eventually extensive collection of scores. His second important network was thus the continental musicians he met while traveling, who later provided the mainstay of his roster of performers, and who incidentally came to epitomize the feature for which London concert life became famous—that is, what contemporary critics called the “parade of foreigners” on British concert stages. When he added Italy to his customary travel routes, he developed a passion for Italian opera that provided a second arrow to his musical quiver for his later career; opera and chamber music became his “twin passions” (99).

In the early 1830s Ella began to make his name as a writer on music, participating in the early growth of music journalism. At the same time his first entrepreneurial endeavors began with series of *soirées musicales*, sold by subscription and evidencing an already-developing core classical repertory, featuring Beethoven. Here some especially interesting aspects of the social history of music arise. Such subscription performances took place both in private houses and in rented halls, since in the early decades of the century there was no clear conceptual distinction between public and private spaces. It has been a vexed question how much the British upper classes participated in domestic music-making; presumably they did so with less energy than their peers on the continent, but Christina Bashford is among those who have been reassessing that assumption, and she provides food for thought here in the course of John Ella's story.

In 1845 Ella launched what would be his *magnum opus*, the Musical Union for the performance of chamber music. It depended for its membership on the upper-class social network with whom he had been working since his arrival in London, growing the audience carefully by recommendation and election only. Although Ella also added a set of somewhat less rarefied "Director's *matinée*" concerts, for which non-members could purchase tickets, the Union itself would continue to be marked by a "halo of leisure and wealth, as well as high musical values" (146). Again, questions for the social historian abound. It is notoriously difficult to assess the motivations of audiences, so while it is likely that Musical Union concerts were primarily social events for many of its members, Bashford argues energetically that many were also driven by a strong and genuine love for the music. We can never know, but it is clear that Ella's own determined belief that aristocratic amateurs were the most serious of listeners colored all of the Union's activities.

Several times during the century, political upheavals in continental Europe drove musicians to Britain as refugees, each time to the advantage of the Musical Union (and also of other musical institutions and organizations, of course). The revolutions of 1848 helped the Union to thrive, especially because many such musical refugees had come to know Ella during his travels, and helped him to expand his operation into "Musical Winter Evenings" that appealed to larger middle-class audiences.

Continually, Ella seems to balance his interest in developing a larger, more general audience with his determination to retain his aristocratic connections. During the 1850s, he is organizing the performance of his arrangements of operatic selections in houses like Sir George Clerk's, but at the same time he has begun to give popular lectures at the London Institute and to develop his increasingly detailed program notes—which by now included

information about both the compositions on the program and the players, using technical terms and printed musical examples for the edification of the audiences he was determined to educate into knowledgeable listeners.

The Musical Union's move into St. James's Hall, opened in 1858, heightened the reverential atmosphere with its decoration of sculpted angels proffering the names of the great composers; in keeping, Ella placed his performers on a central podium and the listeners in seats surrounding them. His audience continued to grow and, notably, included a continually increasing number of women.

One lifelong scheme of Ella's was frustrated by his inability to raise sufficient financial support: his wish to found a Musical Union Institute that would provide a music library, particularly a score collection, a lecture hall, perhaps loan instruments for musicians, and study space. It would be "consecrated to the intellectuality of the musical art" (244) and would, he thought, be appropriately sited in South Kensington where the array of great museums was just then beginning to appear. It never happened; Ella's own music collection finally became part of the library of the Royal College of Music, ending up in South Kensington after all.

Eventually, inevitably, the changing history of music caught up with him. The musical repertory grew in ways that his classicizing intent could no longer cope with; audiences changed, and so did their tastes. Ella warned loudly against the highly popular "monster concerts" and other manifestations of what he considered cheap entertainment for a vulgar mass taste. Bashford is particularly adept at recounting the forces of change that conspired against the Musical Union's survival: the emergence of agents, the increase in the number of performing organizations and concert venues, the dominance of ticket sales as opposed to private subscription, the development of a rapidly lengthening season and of a wider range of ticket prices, and in general the "surfeit of supply and choice" that London saw by the 1870s (323).

What seems to me a fascinating anomaly in Ella's musical profile is his interest in Wagner. He programmed excerpts from the music dramas in his opera club, albeit with passages of his own recomposition that simplified some of the harmonies to ease listeners' comprehension. Given the fact that Wagner's music dramas, not to mention Wagner himself, provided the single most widespread and most vituperative musical controversy of the late century in Britain, it seems counterintuitive that Ella's otherwise conservative and classicizing musical preferences could accommodate him. Bashford tells us that a contemporary journal thought so too, remarking that it was "somewhat singular to find so old a professor of the art taking up with the modern Wagner" (304).

By the time of John Ella's "swansong season" in 1880, he had ironically gotten what he wished for—"the emergence of a mass culture for music" (334)—but not of the sort he had wanted. Rather than a nation of string quartet enthusiasts listening reverently while following the printed score, instead he saw a vibrantly rich and varied musical culture that supplemented those string quartets with other popular choices, from brass band contests to oratorio singing to music hall.

The most striking aspect of Ella's story—and it is unpacked beautifully here—is the almost uncanny way in which his activities, beliefs, and musical goals epitomized the most significant music-historical process of the nineteenth century: the gradual accumulation of the musical canon or "standard repertory," along with all the associated attitudes and behaviors we later came to know so well. Ella was the poster child for "sacralization" and its attendant ideologies.

The economic and social fact that high culture in general was just then becoming less elite and more accessible to a growing and prosperous middle class created the ideal context for the development of an audience aspiring to the finer things, and Ella was there to let them know which the finer things were. From the beginning, he programmed what he insisted on calling "the highest of musical art." He warned his listeners—or, perhaps, assured them—that they would need to do some "hard listening" (285) to become knowledgeable and accomplished music lovers, since these great works were difficult to understand. His Union members developed the habit of listening with score in hand, assisted by Ella's own program notes that urged attention primarily to structural matters and to appropriate reverence for the musical texts as such—as Bashford observes, the scores' "prayer-book size" was telling (141). He encouraged listeners to believe in music as a highly intellectual endeavor and to evaluate composers in terms of their technical mastery of harmony and counterpoint.

His concert programs themselves take a notably modern form: short and concentrated programs devoted to a homogeneous repertory, quite unlike the tradition of long rambling events cobbled together from every kind of performing force available. From the beginning of the Musical Union concerts, the Viennese classics formed the core—as Bashford says, "most of the works we now think of as 'classics' . . . had been put in place in the first few seasons, and they continued to be heard" (187). Gradually, additional now-standard items were added, including especially Mendelssohn, a composer beloved by Victorian audiences. Even as Romantic pieces appeared on the programs, however, often at the behest of visiting performers, Ella's notes continually classicized them with his exclusive attention to structural matters, "applying a classical filter to all he heard" (315). Eventually it became

clear, to the chagrin of many of his contemporaries, that Ella had little use for the work of British composers or, by the end, for contemporary music (with the exception of Wagner). Unsurprisingly, his programming and his writing continually stressed the singular status of Beethoven.

Finally, in a gesture by now taken for granted, Ella insisted upon a new concert etiquette of absolute silence and curtailed audience movement; as Bashford tells us, both Cobbett and Haweis reported that he was not above standing up and calling for quiet if any disturbance occurred during the playing (234).

This is far more than the biography of an obscure Victorian musician. I need somehow to make clear to readers that its subject isn't as specialized as it may appear, both because of Ella's perfect embodiment of the century's larger trends, and also because of the density of social and cultural background Bashford provides. Her research is so exhaustive that she is able to explode any number of period clichés: that British gentlemen did not play music, for instance, or that the aristocracy and gentry attended concerts for purely social and nonmusical reasons. It's also a good read, colorful and beautifully written.

The book is very thickly annotated and therefore likely to be useful to scholars working anywhere in the vicinity of the social history of music in the nineteenth century (I found several new bibliography items I wasn't familiar with). It concentrates a great deal on repertory (Bashford is a player herself) and on the meaning and implication of repertory choices. Appendices provide programs, lists of performers, and analyses of the repertory of both the Musical Union and the Musical Winter Evenings, along with usually elusive audience statistics. She was able to use a wide variety of archival sources from period journalism to Ella's diaries and other private documents held by descendants of the Ella family; among other things, these sources allow her to provide an interesting and unusual running commentary on Ella's finances, enabling a solid comparison to the general situation of musicians in Victorian London. (Despite his lofty goals and aims, after all, Ella was first and foremost an entrepreneur.)

Finally, Bashford is admirably self-conscious about questions of method, and she explains her choices; when speculation is required because of the sparseness or opacity of sources, for example, she describes how she has interpreted the evidence so that we may come to our own conclusions.

A personal note: I wish that Boydell would not produce books on this paper, which is not only unpleasantly heavy but also unerasable, squeaky, and headachingly shiny.