

Pitch-pipes and psalm tunes

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SUMMARY

A pitch-pipe and a manuscript of Psalm tunes, in the possession of the Society and both probably dating to the end of the eighteenth century, are described, and the generic relationship between them is outlined.

THE EXHIBITION IN THE GREAT NORTH MUSEUM to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the Society, *Tales of Antiquarian Adventure*, included material usually kept in the Bagpipe Museum in Morpeth Chantry as well as some now held in the Music Department of Newcastle University. One exhibit was identified as a slide whistle, also known as a Swanee whistle (figs. 1–2). It is square in section, about 500 mm in length, and has a moveable plug that carries a scale marked with letters. It is actually a pitch-pipe. Such devices were in common use, from about the middle of the eighteenth century, in churches that had no organ or other instruments to give the choir a note (Temperley 1979, 147), and there are records of their continued use until well after the middle of the nineteenth century (Macdermott 1948, 43). The pitch-pipe that was in the exhibition is one of two that were found in a drawer in the Black Gate, and unfortunately there is no record of the origin of either of them.

Swanee whistles (as such) became popular around the middle of the nineteenth century, when the Distin family started making them in large numbers, although similar instruments are known in many cultures. They are generally smaller than pitch-pipes, and usually round in section. They do not have a scale attached for tuning purposes, and they are usually considered musical novelties, although they have been used by serious composers (Grove Music Online).

The Society also possesses a manuscript psalm tune book, the first eight pages of which are marked up with indications of pitch for use with a pitch-pipe (SANT library shelf mark MU 210. A photocopy is held in the Northumberland Archives at Woodhorn: SANT/GEN/MUS/1/6). Often the indication in the manuscript matches the written key (pp. 1, 2, 5, 8) but just as often it does not, when the pitch is lowered, once by a semitone and three times by a tone. Such manuscripts were once very common, since printed music was expensive, and members of a church choir would copy tunes from a printed source if available, or from another manuscript.

Since the marking does not continue it seems likely that instruments became available soon after the manuscript was started, probably around 1800, or possibly slightly earlier. A setting of psalm 95 on p. 9 is to a tune first published in that form in 1783, but most of the material is rather earlier. For example, much seems to have been taken from an influential publication that appeared in the 1750s (Holdroyd 1753). With the rise of militia bands during the Napoleonic wars, musical knowledge became more widespread (Mackenzie 1827, 591) and instruments became more common; many vestry books mention their purchase after about 1790.

There are several indications in the manuscript of a local connection. For example, the first recorded publication of one tune (Funeral Tune, p. 20) is in Charles Avison's *Collection of Psalm*



Fig. 1 The pitch-pipe.

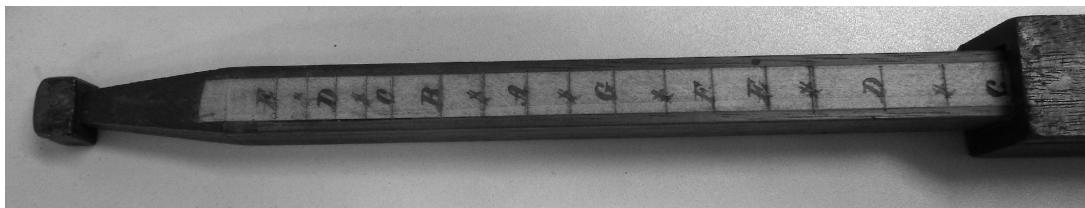


Fig. 2 The sliding internal bar that alters the pitch of the pipe, marked accordingly.

Tunes (Avison 1757: in Newcastle Central Library), and it was subsequently published by Isaac Thompson (1763). This was Thomas Slack's first publication after his partnership with Isaac Thompson was dissolved (Welford 1907, 35). There are several psalm tunes in the Society's manuscript that are not known in any printed source, including one called 'Wark' and another called 'Northseaton'. Neither is particularly remarkable, but they are typical of the many tunes composed by untrained amateurs for church choirs at the period. Anthems are more difficult to identify, since the Hymn Tune Index (Temperley, 1998) is restricted to strophic settings of English words, but again there are some that do not seem ever to have been printed, including one called 'Hexham Anthem'.

I have been unable to find any provenance for the manuscript, although I have seen another in a private collection that is clearly related, since the books have much in common. Clearly the material that was extracted from Holdroyd simply indicates a common printed source, but some tunes, not known from printed sources (or indeed any other manuscript) and with local names, appear in both books.

There is one tune in the Society's manuscript that is particularly intriguing: this had only been known previously from a manuscript that is still in the possession of the family of the original owner, William Gay of Bristol. In the Bristol manuscript it was used in a setting of a metrical version of Psalm 42, 'As pants the hart for cooling streams'. The family had assumed that the tune had been composed by their ancestor. Its discovery in the North East, in the Society's manuscript, set to words from Psalm 119 (figs. 3–4), make that unlikely, and it is probably derived from a printed source that has since disappeared.

The *Hymn Tune Index* lists about 20,000 tunes printed before 1820. Some are widespread and are still well known, whilst others appear in single publications that were printed locally and had limited circulation. Such books would not usually be deposited in the copyright libraries. As fashions in church music changed the old tune-books were usually thrown away,



Figs. 3-4 The tune for Psalm 119, as written out in the Society's manuscript.

and survivors are quite rare: thus the copy of the Avison book that is in Newcastle Central Library is the only one known. Much has undoubtedly been lost. There are tunes in manuscripts from as late as the middle of the nineteenth century that are unknown from surviving printed publications. Without further evidence, such as a printed source, the connection between the Society's manuscript and William Gay in Bristol will remain mysterious.

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