"APOLLO'S SWAN AND LYRE"

Read by Dr. Andrew Parmley, MusM

23 October 2006

Mr President, Fellow Historians, Ladies and Gentlemen,

First a word about my title: it is taken from the quincentenary publication of the Worshipful Company of Musicians, published in 2000. Both items are depicted in the Company's coat of arms and, incidentally, on the new Company tie.

Apollo had many attributes which included being the Greek (and Roman) god of song and the lyre. Apollo was also a powerful god of great strength and prowess who could be vengeful and quick to bring disaster and even death to those who stood against him. It is a great relief to me, therefore, that he never stood for Common Council.

While the peacock is a symbol of material manifestation, the swan stands for the ethereal. It represents the presence of divine inspiration in our world and, in the Greek tradition, was the symbol of the Muses.

In the first century AD, Plutarch, the historian, claimed that the second king of Rome had formed eight city Guilds towards the close of the 8th century BC and, interestingly, King Numa placed the Musicians' Guild in pole position. So there you have it. The Musicians were number one.

Speaking of the number one Company brings me to the second guild I will be discussing today. I refer, of course, not to the Mercers but to the Worshipful Company of Parish Clerks, whose claim to the title of number one in the City cannot be contradicted. After all, their identifying badge, the surplice, was in use long before livery was invented. So, on two counts, this is turning out to be a bad day to be associated with the Mercers' Company.

My objective, in this short address is to reflect the City's long interest in the Arts by discussing the origins of drama and sacred and secular music in the City (by considering the early histories of the Parish Clerks' and Musicians' Companies and the City Waits) and, for the sake of completeness, by fleeting mention of the Painter-Stainers' Company; these three companies – Parish Clerks, Musicians and Painter-Stainers -

being the sole historical custodians of the Arts in the City. Today, of course, things are very different and the Arts receive huge support from many sources. The recent publication of *Viva City! The Economic Impact of the City Arts Cluster* reminds us that "it is often too easy to categorise the City as a world class financial centre and forget that it is also a community endowed with a wealth of arts and history. Arts and culture underpin a vibrant City life…"[1]

In 1502 the Painters, who decorated, gilded and coloured solid objects such as wood, metal and stone, united with the Stainers, who applied colour to woven fabrics. Since that time they have become the guardians of quality for the visual arts and particularly for painting. A modern sign of their great success is that this year's painting competition received seven hundred entries of which the short-listed seventy can be seen in Painters' Hall on 27th November (doors open at 6.00 pm and all the works of art will be available for sale).

The Parish Clerks have long been associated with church music but it may come as a surprise to find that they were among the pioneers of English drama. Their miracle and mystery plays (nowadays revived as the Parish Clerks' Masque) originated in the 9th century and were seen as a means of religious instruction. John Stow[2] wrote, "In the year 1390, the 14th of Richard II … the parish clerks of London, on the 18th July, played interludes at Skinners' well, near to Clerks' well, which play continued three days together, the King, Queen and nobles being present. Also in the year 1409, the 10th of Henry IV, they played a play at Skinners' well, which lasted eight days and was a matter for creation of the world. There were to see the same the most part of notables and gentles in England, etc."

It was more through their association with church music that the Parish Clerks made their mark: from their original duties of chanting services in plainsong; to the establishment of thirty canons who, in the eleventh century in St Paul's Cathedral, each had a deputy, or vicar choral, to sing on his behalf; down to the time of Richard Whittington for whom in 1406, on his election for the second of his three terms of mayoralty, it was ordered that " a Mass of the Holy Ghost should be celebrated with solemn music to the end that the same commonalty by the grace of the Holy Spirit might be able peacefully and amicably to nominate two able and proper persons to be mayor of the City for the ensuing year, the same Mass, by the ordinance of the Chamberlain for the time being, to be

[1] Michael Snyder, *Viva City!* (2006), Foreword
[2] John Stow, *Survey of London* (1598)

solemnly chanted by the finest singers, in the chapel aforesaid and upon that feast".

I find it interesting to note that the Parish Clerks were major forces in the development of the two great arts of music and drama.

The company of clerks must have attracted more worldly musicians into their fraternity although they never really secured the full support of the this group; and a good job too since by 1574 the Ancient Company of Minstrels "hath of late tyme not only much decayed but also hath bynne brought into contempt and hatred by occasion of sundrie disorders and enormities". [Perhaps the early members of the Musicians' Company were less like liverymen and more like an early branch of the Musicians' Union.]

That said the clerks themselves were occasionally less than diligent in the exercise of their musical duties. W H Hale, in his 1847 publication, reported the case brought against a clerk, Thomas Milborne, in 1613. Amongst other complaints held against him it was said that Milborne "singeth the psalms in the church with such a jesticulus tone and altisonant voice, viz. squeakinge like a gelded pigg which doth not onlie interrupt the other voices, but is altogether dissonant and disagreeing unto any musical harmonie and he hath been requested by the minister to leave it, but he doth obstinantlie persist and contynue therein."[3]

Instruction in singing was seen as a very important part of the curriculum as is demonstrated by the generosity of Robert Dowe, a Past Master of the Merchant Taylors' Company, when in 1610 he left £12 per annum to Christ's Hospital for "a sufficient man skilful in music to teach the poor children of that house the knowledge and skill of pricksong".[4]

Perhaps fearing the likes of Thomas Milborne, The Master and Wardens of the Parish Clerks borrowed money against the value of their plate and approached James I for a new charter which created additional powers for them. For the sake of musical integrity in the City, the Master and Wardens "were required to examine every parish clerk admitted to office within these bounds as to whether he could sing the psalms of David according to the usual tunes in the parish churches."[5] However, this test of quality assurance did not preclude some unsatisfactory performances.

[3] W H Hale, *A series of precedents … extracted from Act Books of Ecclesiastical Courts in the Diocese of London* (1847), p.238
[4] A pricksong book forms the crest of the Coat of Arma of the Parish Clerks.
[5] R H Adams, *The Parish Clerks of London* (1971), p. 41

Pepys, in his diary entry for 13th November 1664 (Lord's Day) commented, "This day to church where mighty sport to hear our clerk sing out of tune, although his master sit by him and keep tune aloud for the parish".

Samuel Pepys would have welcomed his friend and music publisher John Playford's *Psalms and hymns in Solemn Musick of Foure Parts or the Common Tunes to the Psalms in Metre*, published in 1671. Playford was well-known to the Company and presented the Master with a copy inscribed "Aprill ye First 1671. The gift of John Playford for the Use of the Parish Clerks at there Hall in Wood Street London". That said, Playford himself seemed to think the battle for decent singing lost. "But at this day the *Best,* and almost all the *Choice Tunes* are lost, and out of use in our *Churches*: nor must we expect it otherwayes, when in and about this great City, in above One hundred Parishes, there is but few *Parish Clerks* to be found that have either Ear or Understanding to Set one of these *Tunes* Musically as it ought to be. Whereby this part of God's Service hath been so ridiculously performed in most places, that it is now brought into Scorn and Derision by many people."

Let us leave the church being scorned and derided and look at music outside the ninety-seven City churches which were within the City walls. It is important to distinguish between the City Waits and the Minstrels (but not wandering Minstrels) who, it is thought, were the founders of the Musicians' Company.

It is clear that originally Waits were night watchmen in palaces, castles, camps and walled towns who piped watch upon a musical instrument at stated hours. They also played for the changing of the guard or alerting the populace in case of alarm and, at times, merely to awaken certain persons at appointed hours by playing soft music at their chamber doors.

The custom of municipalities appointing official Waits may be said to date from the 15th century. There was no rule as to the number of the Waits but from four to six was usual, with nine in London, and their livery was distinctive and highly coloured.

Thomas Morley, in dedicating his *Consort Lessons* to the Lord Mayor and Aldermen in 1599, took time to praise the London Waits, describing them as excellent and expert musicians, and it appears that the fathers were pleased with their night watchmen. The records of the Court of Aldermen state:

1559: “The Chamberlain to buy one of the City Waits.”

1569: “The Waits to be paid for a set of Recorders and Cornets.”

1597: “The Chamberlain shall presently buy and provide the several instruments called a double saggbutt and a curtal for the musicians at the charge of the City.”

Not everybody shared Morley’s view or the Aldermen’s pride in the Waits. Ned Ward, in his *London Spy* derides the London Waits, calling them “tooters of the town; and have gowns, silver chains, and salaries for playing Lilla Bullera to my Lord Mayor’s horse through the City”.[6]

It is not always easy to distinguish Waits from Minstrels, since their duties were often similar, but for centuries there was hostility between the two groups. Trained musicians who served an apprenticeship were accorded official status, badges of office, livery and emoluments. The common Minstrels - itinerant players of very varied capabilities and some little better than rogues or vagabonds - were held in low esteem. Of such Minstrels Alexander Barclay in his “Ship of Fools” (of 1508) wrote:

That by no means can they abide or dwell
Within their houses, but out they must go.
More wildly wandering than buck or doe
Some with their harps, another with his lute
Another with his bagpipe or a foolish flute.

The numbers of itinerant musicians became enormous and it was natural that competent musicians in the pay of royalty, or the nobility, or of municipalities should resent any derogation of their calling. W Chappell in his *Popular Music in Olden Time* remarks “After the Act of the 39th year of Elizabeth which rendered all minstrels wandering abroad liable to punishment as ‘rogues, vagabonds and sturdy beggars’, itinerant musicians were obliged to wear cloaks and badges with the arms of some nobleman, gentleman, or corporate body to denote in whose service they were engaged, being thereby excepted from the operation of the Act.”[7]

Edward IV granted his Minstrels a Charter in 1469. With the relatively settled conditions brought about by Henry VII there may have been an influx of “foreign” minstrels, that is from outside the City, trying to play at gatherings in the City and diluting the musicians’ income. In the City

[6] Ned Ward, *London Spy* (1698)
[7] W Chappell, *Popular Music of Olden Times* (1859)

the local Minstrels complained to the City of London Corporation, formed a City Minstrels Guild and thereby protected their fees. After all, these were talented musicians who could play several instruments, sing and accompany dancing. A century later James I in 1604 granted a charter of incorporation to the Society of Minstrels in London, and thus instituted the Worshipful Company of Musicians.

What instruments did these 16th century musicians play? They fell into two categories, "loud" (and offensive) and "soft" (and inaudible). The usual "loud " group consisted of strident Shawms, precursors of the modern oboe which came in four sizes, and Sackbuts, the ancestor of the trombone whose name was derived from the French for "push and pull". It was, no doubt, a Consort of Shawms and Sackbuts which preceded the Lord Mayor in his annual procession, and which is now replaced and represented by the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment Band.

As an accompaniment to a banquet or other in-door entertainment the "soft" instruments would have been required: lute, harp, recorders and so on. Contemporary paintings give a good idea of the range of instruments available.

Despite their other skills the minstrels were, first and foremost, instrumentalists. The better singers amongst them, who were not in the employ of a substantial church foundation or a noble household, "seem to have been known as 'Musicians' and to have joined the Parish Clerks' Company if they desired or needed to join a Guild.[8] The Parish Clerks were noted even before 1500 (when the Minstrels Guild was founded) for their musical attainments, especially in singing."[9]

Looking at the names of the Court members at the time of the 1604 Charter it is interesting to note that one of the Wardens and three of the Assistants were City Waits, that two Assistants performed at the funeral of Queen Elizabeth I, one of whom subsequently secured an appointment to the King's Musick. Also interesting is the fact that the names of the Master and at least one Warden and four Assistants (out of a Court of sixteen members) appear in the Parish Registers of St Giles Cripplegate and adjoining churches. As with other Guilds it would appear that the Minstrels lived close by one another for mutual support, ease of contact

[8] Hence we have confusing terminology. The Parish Clerks were known as Musicians; the Musicians were known as Minstrels; the wandering Minstrels were known as rogues; and the Waits enjoyed their City of London salaries!

[9] H A F Crewdson, *ibid,* p. 20

.

and business and rehearsal. Cripplegate in the seventeenth century seems to have been the place for music and how appropriate it is that today St Giles is the home of an international organ school and that the Barbican teems with music emanating from the Girls' School, the Guildhall School of Music and Drama and the Barbican Centre itself.

"The City of London and its fringes are home to one of the richest and most diverse concentrations of arts … in the UK. The festivals and institutions in the City arts cluster contribute an estimated £325 million a year to UK GDP and support almost 7,900 jobs across the UK. In 2005, over 10½ million people visited the festivals and institutions within the City arts cluster."[10]

It is, I think, common knowledge that many members of the Court of Common Council were against the building of the Barbican Centre when it was first proposed but what a remarkable institution it has become today. With the planned redevelopment of the Milton Court site and increasing co-operation between the Centre and the Guildhall School, the City of London is on the verge of owning the largest fully integrated arts complex in the world. It will be unique and it will demonstrate the strength of the City of London Corporation's commitment to the Arts and it will provide prosperity for the area and for the artists who perform there.

I end by referring to my title again and by quoting the text of the very beautiful madrigal, *The Silver Swan,* by Orlando Gibbons:

The Silver Swan, who living, had no note
When death approached unlocked her silent throat.
Leaning her breast against the reedy shore,
Thus sang her first and last, and sang no more.
Farewell all joys,
Oh, death, come close mine eyes.
More geese than swans now live
More fools than wise.

Thank you.

[10] Michael Snyder, *ibid.*