

From 'News and Notes'

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John Alcock (1715–1806)

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John Alcock, organist of St Andrew's, Plymouth, from 1737 until 1741, was born on 11 April 1715, baptised at St Benet's, Paul's Wharf on 1 May, the third child of Daniel and Mary Alcock of Crane Court, close by St Paul's Cathedral. Aged seven, he entered the choir school there under Charles King and later joined the cathedral choir. William Boyce was, as he described it, his 'schoolfellow and bedfellow'.

In 1727, as sole junior representative of St Paul's Choir, he sang at the coronation of King George II. During those early years he became a friend of Pepusch and started to build up his collection of older music before he left St Paul's with gifts of manuscripts from King and Boyce.

In 1728, when he was about 13, his song, *Celinda, when I view that face*, was published and the next year he became amanuensis to the blind organist John Stanley, two years his senior. Alcock left the cathedral when his voice broke and became Stanley's first apprentice. His friendship with him lasted until Stanley's death in 1786; he deputised for him at the Temple Church and St Andrew's Holborn. After the expiry of his apprenticeship in 1736, applied unsuccessfully for organistships at St Antolin's, Budge Row and St Giles' Cripplegate in the City.

The following year, at All Hallows', London Wall, he married Margaret Beaumont, of Brompton, near Chatham, a match financially to his advantage. Her portrait, reproduced below, dates from 1746 when she was thirty-five.

He now needed both status and income. What prompted him then to move to far-away Plymouth – travelling with his belongings, probably by wagon, and taking at least a week – is not clear. Zachariah Mudge, the vicar of St Andrew's who was, according to his sermons, a supporter of improving standards of parochial church music, must have supported him.

It seems that life for him at St Andrew's was without any major problems. Three of his twelve children were born there including John (junior) in 1740. Charity children, usually a motley crowd of poor children from local free schools, provided a stimulus to write anthems and psalm tunes. His *Six Suites of Easy Lessons for the Harpsicord or Spinnet with a Trumpet Piece* [sic] was published during these years.

In 1741 Stanley opened a new organ by Byfield at the municipal church of St Laurence in Reading. Doubtless on his recommendation, and certainly with the agreement of the Mayor and Corporation (Tory, in a politically-corrupt borough), Alcock was appointed the new, but not the first, organist. A letter dated 1 August 1741 from the Vicar, the Revd William Boudry, to James Harris (1709–80) of Salisbury, describes some of the background:

I am exceedingly pleas'd to find that you remember an old lover of musick, & I should have been glad to have served the person you recommend. But first of all the judges declared a young lad named Clack to be the best player yet he was by no means a good organist – And as a good organ can afford no pleasure without a good organist, I prevailed with the parish to choose one Mr Alcock of Plymouth[.] – I hope therefore you will not take amiss my behaviour in this affair, & if you do not take it amiss I beseech you to shew it by taking a ride to play on the prettiest organ in England of the same price.

Richard Clack appears soon to have moved to Plymouth and subsequently became organist of Hereford Cathedral.

So in January 1742 the Alcock family arrived at Reading.

It is clear that Alcock had made a name for himself among polite society in London and whilst at Reading published *Twelve English Songs* (1743), designed for the London Pleasure Gardens. Many of the 20 or so more of his songs were published in the *Gentleman's Magazine* or in anthologies. His well-crafted *Six Concertos* were published in 1750 and a volume of parochial psalmody a couple of years before.

Alcock made his Tory leanings clear, as became apparent by his behaviour at Reading. He played at the opening of the Radcliffe Camera in Oxford in 1749, an event politically tense. Having unsuccessfully applied in 1746 for the post at Salisbury Cathedral, were there political influences in his next appointment, by invitation, to Lichfield Cathedral in January 1750? Here the poll books indicate that he supported the Tory cause, although Whig support at the Cathedral may have contributed to the pressures he experienced there.

The appointment initially was as vicar choral, a freehold post. He was then appointed organist and, as a separate appointment, Master of the Choristers.

His attempt to improve standards both of the singing and the condition of the choir part-books led to an irretrievable breakdown of relations between him and nearly all with whom he worked. Many details, and there is no reason to doubt them, are in the prefatory material to collections of music that he published, not only in those years but a decade later.

From childhood his commitment was to cathedral music. Over the years he acquired a significant collection of manuscript material and in 1752 he issued a prospectus to publish accurate editions of services and then anthems. However, Maurice Greene held similar ideas with probably greater financial resources, so Alcock withdrew his plan and allowed Greene the use of his material.

Eventually, the frustrations of life as Organist and Master of the Choristers became too much, or rather, he wanted to have his revenge. He resigned both of those posts, but remained a vicar choral, which freehold he retained to his death. This left the cathedral without an organist until one of the vicars choral left or died. When this happened a few years later, his successor had to sign a bond for £500 that he would not resign the organistship without ceasing to be a vicar choral. That was a considerable sum in those days and reflects the feelings of the dean and chapter over Alcock's actions. But the situation had been also one of tit-for-tat. Many an organist knows how to get his own back on singers or clergy.

Provocative prefaces to some of his works lampoon the conditions he had to endure, including lax attendance, incompetence and drunkenness among the lay vicars. He had reacted using his organ playing – loudly, softly, or at varying tempi, which inflamed the situation, his ‘splenetic tricks upon the organ’ aggravating the musical situation even more. There is no doubt that he mocked the vocal mannerisms of both lay vicars and clergy. But Alcock’s *tour-de-force* is his semi-autobiographical novel, *The Life of Miss Fanny Brown*. It is written in the then-fashionable epistolary style under the pseudonym of John Piper.

This book is mentioned in the early editions of Grove and in Scholes’s *Oxford Companion to Music*. But even the antiquarian John Bumpus admitted that he had not seen a copy. Was its existence a fiction? Its discovery, which enabled its contents to be compared with archival material at Lichfield, the prefaces to his Morning and Evening Service, published in 1753, and his 1771 collection of anthems, provides a vivid picture of the problems he experienced at the cathedral. It also conveys to the reader a glimpse of political and church corruption in the middle of the century, together with a picture of Alcock’s own extensive travels, library and reading. It reflects too his experiences in London in the 1720s and early 1730s and, in a manner that is difficult to pin down, some of his family relationships and those of his wife, whose mother subscribed to nine copies. ‘Mr. Whitfield, Clerk of St Andrew’s, Plymouth’ was among the 334 subscribers for 428 copies.

The fiction element of the book, a moral story ostensibly written for the benefit of his children, is the tale of a young lady and her family, and her subsequent marriage. It owes something to Richardson’s *Pamela*. As well, there are asides, brief sketches of the life of clergy, musicians and landowners, descriptions of visits to cathedrals and so forth. Much of this was certainly in Alcock’s own experience.

Later, in 1775 and also under the name John Piper, he published *A collection of moral sentences, remarkable stories, puns and jokes*, 98 of them, a rather weak piece, though not without interest. A possibly unique copy is at Cornell University.



John Alcock – Peter Marr



Margaret Alcock – Peter Marr

Meanwhile Alcock had gained his B.Mus. at Oxford in 1755 and his D.Mus. 11 years later. The portrait reproduced here shows him in his doctoral robes very soon after.

A word about his church music. He wrote some 72 original psalm tunes, a number of hymns (i.e. simple hymn-anthems) and re-harmonised 117 psalm tunes, the latter published in three collections. The most interesting of these is *The Pious Soul's Heavenly Exercise*, (1756), harmonisations with extensive ornamentation of 18 'old' psalm tunes. Four years before, he had published *Divine Harmony: or, a Collection of Fifty-five Double and Single Chants.... As they are Sung at the Cathedral of Lichfield*. This is the first one-composer collection of Anglican chants. Meticulously laid out to facilitate pointing, they contain a great deal of ornamentation for all four parts and raise questions about tuning and temperament for an accompanying organ.

It was John Alcock junior who wrote the Anglican chant that has survived in a number of Anglican psalters.

A considerable quantity of Alcock's service music is in manuscript at Lichfield. He wrote at least 43 anthems, many of them solo and verse anthems, of which four he dates from his time at Plymouth. Some are of considerable length, especially those with orchestral accompaniment, one of which was performed at the Three Choirs Festival in 1773 and another at the Music Rooms at Oxford. From a handful of shorter and generally later full anthems, some may know *Wherewithal shall a young man cleanse his way*.

In 1771, the publisher Thompson issued his *Ten Voluntaries for Organ*, some of which owe something to Stanley. Others are longer and those for Cornet require a fair amount of right-hand stamina. Like the 1741 harpsichord suites, they are now available in modern editions. With the help of two of his sons, John and William, he was organist at Sutton Coldfield and Tamworth, finally leaving in 1790.

It is surprising that a person who caused so many arguments should devote much of the latter part of his life, between the 1770s and the 1790s, to writing convivial music: glees (30 or so), catches (18 or so) and canons (some 20). Many of these were written for the Nobleman and Gentleman's Catch Club, gaining him a number of their prizes. In 1791 he published by subscription a volume of these, *Harmonia Festi*, and many found their way into the popular anthologies of the day.

The next year his wife, Margaret, died. Reflecting on his sorrow in a letter to a friend, to whom he owed £10, he says that he was relying for support on his daughter, also called Margaret. And with his all-too-frequent reminder that he was the 'Senior Vicar', he proudly described his roomy accommodation in the Close at Lichfield, where he had been a thorn in the side of Dean and Chapter from his arrival in 1750 and would remain so until his death in 1806.