

## THE SINGER AND COMPOSER HENRY HOLCOMBE (1690–1756)

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**Izvleček:** Henry Holcombe (1690–1756) se je z glasbo prvič srečal kot pevec v zboru stolnice v Chestru. Leta 1705 se je preselil v London, kjer je pel v gledališču Drury Lane. Kasneje je deloval kot izredno uspešen zasebni učitelj glasbe. Šele kasneje v življenju je dosegel svoj polni potencial kot skladatelj in izdal štiri glasbene zbirke vrhunske kakovosti. Pričujoča razprava je prva podrobnejša študija Holcombovega življenja in dela.

**Ključne besede:** Henry Holcombe, gledališče Drury Lane, angleška pesem, kanconeta

**Abstract:** Henry Holcombe (1690–1756) was trained as a chorister at Chester Cathedral. In 1705 he moved to London, where he sang at the Drury Lane theatre. He later pursued a lucrative career as a private music teacher. Only in later life did he achieve his full potential as a composer, producing four collections of exceptional quality. This is the first study to examine Holcombe's life and music in detail.

**Keywords:** Henry Holcombe, Drury Lane theatre, English song, canzonetta

### The Holcombes of South Perrott, Dorset

The picturesque Dorset village of South Perrott lies on the route from Dorchester, in the south of this West Country county, to Crewkerne in a north-westerly direction. Shortly after the village church of St Mary, by royal decree in 1534, adopted the Anglican rite, new registers of baptisms and marriages in the parish (and doubtless also of deaths, but the relevant register does not survive) were started. The baptismal register runs from 1538 to 1812, that for marriages from 1539 also to 1812.<sup>1</sup> Together, these registers afford a conspectus – very incomplete but nevertheless revealing – of the population of this village during that period.

The baptismal register records the christening, therefore indirectly also the birth, of sixteen persons with the surname Holcombe, stretching from Dionisia, daughter of William, in 1541 to John, son of James, in 1686. Recorded marriages in the village are fewer: only six between 1555 and 1628, divided equally between male and female Holcombes. There appears to have been a maximum of two Holcombe households, certainly closely related, in

<sup>1</sup> For links to tables giving the complete content of both registers, with normalized spelling of personal names, see the website <http://www.opcdorset.org/SouthPerrott/SouthPerrott.htm>. All web citations in the present article were verified on 30 September 2022.

the village at any one time. Why no new Holcombes are listed after 1686 could have been for any number of causes including infertility and fatality resulting from infectious illness, but more likely on account of settlement in other locations following marriage (mostly for females) or in connection with new employment (mostly for males), not forgetting simple family reasons including the acquisition through inheritance of new properties.

The surname Holcombe, a toponym, is a compound of Old English “hol”, meaning hollow, and “combe” (also spelt “coombe”, “comb”, “com” etc.), a word of Celtic origin meaning a short, straight valley. Locations with this name (and also that of simple “Combe”) are found predominantly, though not exclusively, in Dorset, Devon and Somerset – where, indeed, such valleys are especially common. The derived surname is moderately common and unsurprisingly most prevalent also in the West Country (excluding Cornwall).

The Holcombe in South Perrott of particular interest to us, being the composer’s father, is Henry Holcombe (his name entered into the register as “Henricus Holcomb”), son of John, christened on 14 April 1645.<sup>2</sup> No John Holcombe living in South Perrott before then appears in the register, so Henry’s father could well have been a recent incomer.

By good fortune, we know what trade Henry Holcome senior plied, since his occupation is stated in the apprenticeship contract binding his son John on 1 February 1697/1698 to George Croke, a master tailor in Chester (where Henry himself was now living).<sup>3</sup> There, Henry is described as a “Flanders lace weaver”. Lace weaving was at the time a thriving cottage industry undertaken in private dwellings, urban or rural, all over England and was protected from foreign competition by legally enforced import restrictions. Dorset was noted for its lace production: a one-sentence characterization of the county dating from 1795 reads: “Dorsetshire makes cordage for the navy, feeds an incredible number of sheep, and has large lace-manufactures”.<sup>4</sup> An account of Buckinghamshire published in 1782 observes:

It [the town of Newport Pagnell] flourishes greatly, by means of the lace manufacture, which we [the English] stole from the Flemings, and introduced with great success into this county. There is scarcely a door to be seen, during summer, in most of the towns, but what is occupied by some industrious pale-faced lass; their sedentary trade forbidding the rose to bloom in their sickly cheeks.<sup>5</sup>

Lace, however, was of many different kinds and degrees of intricacy, and it is likely in view of Henry’s specific description as a Flanders lace weaver that he operated at the higher end of the market and earned a decent living.

Immediately before his definitive move to Chester Henry lived in a place named only as “Comb”. We know this from an allegation dated 25 September 1683 approving his marriage by licence at Chester Cathedral to one Frances Thompson, a resident of

<sup>2</sup> See also the genealogical website FamilySearch (hereafter, FS), dataset England, Dorset, Parish Registers, 1538–2001, which transcribes personal names in original form.

<sup>3</sup> Cheshire Archives and Local Studies, Apprenticeship Registers, ZM/AB/2/f. 2 (accessible via the National Archives, Kew, <https://discovery.nationalarchives.gov.uk/>).

<sup>4</sup> Guthrie, *New Geographical, Historical, and Commercial Grammar*, 243.

<sup>5</sup> Pennant, *Journey from Chester to London*, 342–343.

that city.<sup>6</sup> The West Country is awash with Combes (plus their many homophones and compounds), between which it seems almost arbitrary to choose. If invited to guess, I would opt for Combe Almer, a village close to the town of Wimborne Minster in Dorset, on account of a possible connection (mentioned later) that emerges from the subscription list of Henry junior's first published collection.

### **The Holcombes in Chester**

Henry was probably already living and working in Chester by the time he met Frances. Since there is no record of any Holcombes living in Chester before his arrival, there is no obvious reason for his removal there except that, as a major centre for the production and distribution of lace, the city offered reasonable prospects to a skilled artisan in that domain. But, of course, he may nevertheless have had relatives by marriage living there. Settling in the parish of St Oswald (this church was Chester's most important after the cathedral), he and Frances soon produced a numerous brood: John in 1684; Thomas in 1685; Anne in 1687; Henry in 1690 (christened at St Oswald as "Henry Holcome" on 13 April); James in 1691; Frances in 1693; Mary in 1694; Elizabeth in 1697; William in 1700. Of the nine children, only Henry achieved distinction in life. Mary and William died in early childhood (in 1697 and 1701, respectively), while Anne, unmarried, survived only until 1711. On Thomas and James there is no further information so far. John duly became a tailor, married a local woman, Sarah Keys, in 1710 and at the time of his death in 1739 was living in Eccleston, close to Chester.<sup>7</sup> In 1729 Frances married a limner (portrait painter) likewise from Chester, James Christian, who died in 1746; it seems that she then reverted to her maiden name and was the Frances Holcombe buried at St Oswald in 1763. Elizabeth seems not to have married, remaining in Chester her whole life and dying in 1764. As for the parents of the siblings, Henry senior was most probably the "Hen. Holecomb" buried at St Oswald on 11 November 1736, which would make him ninety-one at the time of death. When and where his wife Frances *née* Thompson died has not yet been traced.<sup>8</sup>

### **Henry Holcombe Junior: From Chester Chorister to London Theatre Singer**

For information on young Henry's brief period of musical education as a chorister at Chester Cathedral and concurrent general education at the attached King's School we

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<sup>6</sup> FS, England, Cheshire, Marriage Bonds and Allegations, 1606–1900.

<sup>7</sup> FS, England, Cheshire Parish Registers, 1538–2000; FS, England, Cheshire Bishop's Transcripts, 1598–1900.

<sup>8</sup> The information on births, marriages, deaths and (when present) occupations given in this paragraph all comes from FS and is derived variously from the following three databases: FS, England, Cheshire Parish Registers, 1538–2000; FS, England, Cheshire Bishop's Transcripts, 1598–1900; FS, England, Births and Christenings, 1538–1975. Wherever possible, the information given in the databases has been checked against reproductions of the original records made accessible online by FS.

must turn to an article by Ian Spink – seemingly unnoticed previously by investigators of the musician’s life – that discusses a manuscript organ book from Chester cathedral preserved in the Nanki Music Library, Tokyo.<sup>9</sup> Henry was admitted as a boy treble to the choir towards the end of 1698, thus aged eight, and left it, perhaps prematurely, at the end of 1704. He attended the King’s School from 1701 until the same date. The book itself contains miscellaneous childish jottings by its users, including one by a fellow chorister reading: “Henery Holcome is a bastard & is [his] mother got him & his father [...] [the rest illegible]”, and another asserting: “Henery Holcombe is a great Roage [rogue]”.

How and when Henry’s musical talent was discovered and the process by which he gained admission as a chorister remain unknown. The two men holding the post of organist-cum-choirmaster during the six years of his membership of the choir were first William Kay (until 1699) and then John Monnterratt – neither man of particular distinction.<sup>10</sup> To have later achieved such admiration as a singer and composer apparently without any sustained period of advanced musical tuition under a recognized master suggests a rare ability on Henry’s part to learn his craft mainly through observation and immersion in its practice.

Why Henry did not serve out his time in the choir until his voice broke (remembering that in the eighteenth century the onset of male puberty was often a few years later than has become normal today) and possibly seek readmission after his adult voice had settled are unresolved questions. Sir John Hawkins, in his *General History of the Science and Practice of Music* (1776), does not comment on Holcombe’s voice type as a singer in productions at the Drury Lane theatre in London during the 1704/05 (starting in February 1705), 1705/06 and 1706/07 seasons,<sup>11</sup> but the fourth volume of Charles Burney’s *General History of Music* (1789) identifies it as treble, indicating a boy’s voice not yet broken.<sup>12</sup> This statement seems to be corroborated by surviving songs naming Holcombe (under his theatrical sobriquet of “The Boy”) as the singer, from the pens of such composers as John Blow, Jeremiah Clarke, Richard Leveridge, Robert Cox and Daniel Purcell: these concur in fixing the outer limits of Henry’s compass at d’ and g” (exceptionally, a” in the aria “A Thousand Fairy Scenes Appear” in Thomas Clayton’s *Rosamond* of 1707).<sup>13</sup> After Henry’s voice broke, he ended up as a tenor, but although there are several later mentions of his appearance in public as a singer, we lack references to specific compositions and therefore have no means at present of discovering his working vocal compass during adult life.

Regarding the great change in Henry’s life that occurred in 1704–1705, we should consider three things in particular: first, whether his removal to London and recruitment

<sup>9</sup> Spink, “Chester Organ Book”, 139–140.

<sup>10</sup> On Kay and Monnterratt, see Shaw, *Succession of Organists*, 65–66.

<sup>11</sup> Hawkins, *General History*, 187.

<sup>12</sup> Burney, *General History*, 633. The fact that Burney believed Holcombe to have been “brought up in Salisbury [not Chester!] cathedral” reminds one of his frequent fallibility over factual details.

<sup>13</sup> Several songs sung by “The Boy” at Drury Lane are contained in John Walsh the elder’s compilation *A Collection of the Choicest Songs & Dialogues Composed by the Most Eminent Masters of the Age* (London, [1715 or later]), Smith no. 463. This was essentially an *ad hoc* binder’s collection uniting a large number of songs originally published separately in songsheet form. The two examples in the British Library (shelfmarks G. 304 and G. 151) partly vary in content.

as a junior member by the Drury Lane company were linked projects from the outset; second, who in Chester arranged and financed the move; third, who acted as his guardian and/or protector in London during the rest of his adolescence. None of these questions has a clear answer at present. My suspicion is that his father sent him (now nearly at the age of fourteen, when a boy traditionally commenced an apprenticeship) to an unidentified relative or close family friend in London without a clear idea of his future, but perhaps with a hope that it would lie in music. Henry may then have an opportunity to demonstrate his precocious musical ability to someone connected with Drury Lane, from which his engagement duly followed.

Dramatic productions at Drury Lane were during this period entirely in English or, at most (speaking of all-sung operas), in a mixture of English and Italian. Even when nominally spoken, plays ordinarily included an assortment of vocal items (ranging from solos to choruses), instrumental pieces and often dancing. Some musical items were (to borrow a modern term) “diegetic” – performed or overheard by members of the cast as a peripheral component of the action – while others, especially when occurring before, between or after the acts, were external to the plot after the fashion of French *divertissements*. The entr’actes included much music taken from the classics of English theatrical music – for instance, Henry Purcell’s “Frost” music from the “dramatic opera” *King Arthur* – alongside the novelties.

Between 15 February 1705 and 24 May 1707 Holcombe appeared as a singer in conjunction with almost fifty productions (including many that featured repeat performances during the same season) at Drury Lane.<sup>14</sup> His evolving appellations in playbills, press announcements and songsheets reflect growing acceptance by his fellow singers and the public. At his first appearance, in *Tunbridge Wells*, he is the “new Boy”. This mutates into “The Boy” for *Rule a Wife and Have a Wife* (opening on 16 October 1705) and finally into “The late Boy” for *The Recruiting Officer* (opening on 1 November 1706), by which time he was artistically and doubtless also physically mature enough to slough off the increasingly inapposite epithet. Published material for the two all-sung operas in which he was a full, albeit minor, participant – as Prenesto in *Camilla* (1706), adapted by Nicola Haym from an opera by Giovanni Bononcini, and The Page in Thomas Clayton’s *Rosamond* in 1707 – more fittingly style him “Mr. Holcomb”. Holcombe often sang alone, but at other times in tandem or in ensemble with other singers in the company, the most regularly appearing of whom were Littleton Ramondon, Richard Leveridge, Catherine Tofts, Francis Hughes and Mary Lindsey. Several of Holcombe’s colleagues had a knowledge of Italian and familiarity with Italian music, which quickly rubbed off on him. Indeed, Haym probably assisted him for the operas as a language coach as well as singing coach. All in all, this short but intensive period in Holcombe’s career was the most formative, pointing him towards his future not only as a performer but also as a composer.

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<sup>14</sup> The main source of information for Holcombe’s public appearances as a singer is *London Stage* (vol. 1, bk. 2.), covering the period 1700–1729. This is supplemented by announcements in the British press, as retrievable from the database “Seventeenth and Eighteenth Century Burney Newspapers Collection”, <https://www.gale.com/intl/c/17th-and-18th-century-burney-newspapers-collection>.

The sole testimony to the quality of Holcombe's singing in the Drury Lane company that I have seen appears in a letter of Juliana Wentworth to her brother-in-law Thomas Wentworth, 1st Earl of Strafford.<sup>15</sup> The receipt of the letter is dated 2 January 1707 (1708).<sup>16</sup> Commenting on the Italian castrato singer Valentino Urbani (the first of his kind to appear in England, in *Camilla*, where he assumed the role of Turnus on 8 March 1707), Mrs Wentworth writes how “wee had a boy of our one [*recte*, own] nation last winter y<sup>e</sup> [that] had a more agreeable voice then [*sic*] any of them [castrati?] but has been fooll enough to Lose itt for his Laudness [Loudness?] [...]”. Could the writer perhaps have been referring to hoarseness induced by the high A in *Rosamond*, or does the remark have more to do with Holcombe's breaking voice?

Apropos of Holcombe's readiness to cultivate the Italian language as performer, teacher or composer within the sphere of vocal music, it should be emphasized that he was second only to Maurice Greene among his generation of native-born English musicians.<sup>17</sup> In his anonymously written entry for Holcombe in Abraham Rees's multi-volume *Cyclopaedia* Burney noted something about the musician that he had mentioned only cursorily in his *General History*:

He had many scholars, particularly in singing; for which, from constantly frequenting the opera, after he had ceased to perform there [i.e. after 1707], and hearing all the great singers, from Valentini [Valentino Urbani] and Nicolini, to Senesino and Farinelli, he must have been very well qualified, and we have been assured by very good judges, who had often heard him sing in private, that his taste was perfectly Italian.<sup>18</sup>

Indeed, such was our musician's eagerness to increase his knowledge of Italian that in 1727, during the heyday of the Royal Academy of Music when Italian-language libretti were widely collected and perused in England, “Mr. Henry Holcombe of Surrey-street” became the sole musician apart from Michael Festing and Nicola Haym to subscribe to Ferdinando Altieri's *Dizionario inglese ed italiano*.<sup>19</sup>

It is revealing to look at the opening of a song performed in 1705 by Holcombe in Owen Swiney's comedy *The Quacks, or Love's the Physician*, for it shows that he was entrusted at Drury Lane with vocally demanding material making no allowance for his young age (Music example 1). The composer, his colleague Richard Leveridge (1670–1758), writes in a style recognizably English in character (as evidenced by the “modal” F natural in bars 4 and 9, the intricate, manneristic rhythms of the vocal part, the abrupt change

<sup>15</sup> London, British Library, Add. MS 22,227, fol. 1v. I have to thank Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson for their kindness in showing me the relevant extract in a transcription made by Thomas McGeary.

<sup>16</sup> Where years relating to England are shown in “dual” form, the earlier year is that given, usually alone, in the original document, while the later year is the modern equivalent adjusted to reflect the fact that prior to 1752 the year advanced officially on 25 March, not 1 January.

<sup>17</sup> On Greene's many and diverse compositions set to Italian words, see Talbot, “Maurice Greene's Vocal Chamber Music”.

<sup>18</sup> *Cyclopaedia*, s.v. “Holcombe, Henry”.

<sup>19</sup> Altieri, *Dizionario inglese ed italiano*, subscription list. The suffix “of Surrey-street” appended to Holcombe's name (but not to those of Festing and Hay) can be viewed as a claim to elevated social status, a subject discussed later in this article.

of metre in bar 13 and the reverse dotting in bars 18 and 19). But superimposed on this there are also a few Italianate touches, such as the “double Devisé” at the start (almost normative in Italian arias written around 1700), and in the later part of the song (not shown) bass passages in running quavers of pure Corellian type. The stylistic flexibility later displayed by Holcombe in his own compositions was certainly well nourished by his experience at Drury Lane.

**Music example 1**

Richard Leveridge, *To Gentle Strephon Tell Your Grief* (“A SONG in the PLAY call’d the Quacks or Lov’s [*sic*] the Physitian, Sung by the Boy. Sett by M.<sup>r</sup> Leveridge”), opening.

[Allegro]

The musical score is presented in six systems, each with a vocal line (treble clef) and a basso continuo line (bass clef). The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The tempo marking is [Allegro].

- System 1:** Measures 1-3. The vocal line begins with a rest, followed by a half note G4 and a quarter note A4. The basso continuo line starts with a half note G2, followed by a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4.
- System 2:** Measures 4-6. The vocal line continues with a half note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4. The basso continuo line continues with a half note G4, followed by a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.
- System 3:** Measures 7-9. The vocal line has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The basso continuo line continues with a half note G2, followed by a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.
- System 4:** Measures 10-12. The vocal line has a half note B4, a quarter note C5, and a quarter note B4. The basso continuo line continues with a half note G4, followed by a series of eighth notes: A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.
- System 5:** Measures 13-17. The time signature changes to 3/4. The vocal line has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The basso continuo line continues with a half note G2, followed by a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.
- System 6:** Measures 18-19. The time signature changes to 3/4. The vocal line has a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a quarter note B4. The basso continuo line continues with a half note G2, followed by a series of eighth notes: A2, B2, C3, D3, E3, F3, G3, A3, B3, C4, D4, E4, F4, G4, A4, B4, C5, B4, A4, G4, F4, E4, D4, C4, B3, A3, G3, F3, E3, D3, C3, B2, A2, G2.

## Henry as Freelance Musician, Private Music Teacher and Gentleman

Even before leaving the Drury Lane company, Holcombe had been one of the first singers in England to perform in public English cantatas on the Italian model, introducing “a new English cantata” there on 1 June 1706.<sup>20</sup> Not very long afterwards he expanded his repertoire to include Italian-language cantatas. At York Buildings, on 31 March 1710, he sang “several Italian Cantata’s never yet heard in England” in a benefit concert for the violinist William Viner, following this with a performance, at a benefit concert on 17 April at the same venue, of “several songs in Italian and English”.<sup>21</sup> Later in 1710 (on 29 June) he performed “Three select Entertainments in Italian” at the Queen’s Theatre in the Haymarket in accompaniment to George Villiers’s play *The Chances*; these were possibly cantatas sung as entr’actes.<sup>22</sup> He made a similar intervention on 6 July, when William Congreve’s play *The Old Bachelor* was revived there;<sup>23</sup> this seems, amazingly, to have been almost the last public musical event held in London that mentions Holcombe as a performer, the sole known exceptions being a special benefit concert for him at Drury Lane on 26 February 1729 “at the Desire of several Ladies of Quality”<sup>24</sup> and a subscription concert series held on Fridays at Hickford’s Great Room that opened, after a delay, on 26 January 1733.<sup>25</sup> In both instances, the concerts, while not held in private homes, seem to have drawn their audiences from the elevated milieu that Holcombe was now serving as a music teacher or otherwise mingled with socially and were therefore not “public” in the fullest sense.

During the 1710s, and perhaps for a little longer, Holcombe paid occasional visits to provincial centres. He toured with the violinist William Corbett (an enthusiastic advocate for Italian instrumental music) and others in 1709, participating in concerts in York on 8 August during Assize week (the “Sizes”) and at Nottingham on 16–19 August following the Races.<sup>26</sup> More intriguing is a visit – perhaps more than one visit – to Bath in the period leading up to 1714. This is possibly biographically significant in view of Holcombe’s later connection with the city, which during the first decades of the eighteenth century was rapidly evolving from a simple spa visited primarily for its curative powers into England’s premier centre of fashionable recreation. In the fifth, penultimate volume (1714) of his vast collection of ballads (a term mostly used for especially long strophic songs with a narrative content) and songs the compiler, Thomas D’Urfey, included a witty anonymous

<sup>20</sup> Not quite the earliest: the Italian singer Margarita L’Épine had already done this, likewise at Drury Lane, on 13 April 1706.

<sup>21</sup> Both concerts announced in *The Tatler*, 25–27 March and 13–15 April 1710.

<sup>22</sup> Avery, *London Stage*, bk. 1, 226.

<sup>23</sup> Announced in the *Daily Courant*, 4 July 1710.

<sup>24</sup> Avery, *London Stage*, bk. 2, 1017. The role of the “Ladies of Quality” was presumably to underwrite the costs, guaranteeing Holcombe against loss. Very possibly, this concert, where he reportedly sang six songs, was a collective thanksgiving for his work as a private music teacher.

<sup>25</sup> With thanks to Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson for bringing to my notice this concert series, whose revised opening date is announced in the *London Evening Post*, 2–4 January 1733.

<sup>26</sup> Announced in the *Daily Courant*, 2 August 1709. Concerts in the English provinces were often scheduled to coincide with non-musical public events at which the higher layers of society congregated.



parody of the venerable “Ballad upon a Wedding” by the cavalier poet Sir John Suckling (1609–1642), which opens with the line “I tell thee, Dick, where I have been”. The parody is entitled “The Bath Teazers, or A Comical Discription of the Diversions at Bath” and begins with a similar line: “I’ll tell thee, Dick, where I have lately been”.<sup>27</sup> The new poem, for which a suitably grotesque tune is supplied (unusually for the collection, it is notated in the bass clef), comments satirically on the musical fare recently served up to Bath’s visitors. Stanzas 4–7 (omitting the refrain) repay scrutiny:<sup>28</sup>

And now for the crew that pass in the throng,  
That live by the gut, or the pipe or the song,  
And teize [tease] all the gentry as they pass along.

First *Corbet* began[:] my Lord, pray your crown,  
You’ll hear a new boy I’ve just brought to town,  
I’m sure he will please you, or else knock me down.

Besides, I can boast of myself and two more,  
And *Leveridge*, the Bass that sweetly will roar,  
Till the whole audience joins in an anchore [encore].

Next *H—b*, *L—r* and *B—r* too,  
With hauboy, one fidle, and tenor so blew,  
And fusty old musick, not one note of new.

Stanza 4 suggests that the hired musicians belonged to a cohesive ensemble (“crew”) comprising players of stringed (“gut”) and wind (“pipe”) instruments besides singers, and that they advertised their forthcoming performances to the assembled company. Stanza 5 clarifies that Corbett – appropriately, as the senior violinist – was the band’s leader. The mention immediately afterwards of a “new boy” could very well be a sly allusion to Holcombe’s former sobriquet. Stanza 6 adds the bass singer Leveridge to the group. Helpfully, a reprint of the poem in the third volume (1725) of the song anthology entitled *The Hive* supplies the missing letters for the three musicians named in stanza 7. They are Holcombe, the oboist Peter Latour and the violinist John Banister junior. Holcombe must by elimination be the “tenor” mentioned in the next line. In theory, the word “tenor” could, in English usage, refer to the viola, but on balance, and especially in view of his likely identity as the poem’s “new boy”, it more probably denotes his vocal register.

Holcombe’s work as a music teacher – certainly of singing and the harpsichord and possibly also of the violin and composition – conceivably began only a few years after his Drury Lane period. It was firmly oriented towards the upper echelons of society, and in particular to the financial elite occupying leading positions in dominant institutions

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<sup>27</sup> D’Urfey, *Wit and Mirth*, 183–184. From autumn 1710 to autumn 1714 the Drury Lane theatre was not permitted to employ specialist singers, a situation that released Leveridge and others for freelance work elsewhere. On the restriction and its effects, see Baldwin and Wilson, “With Several Entertainments”, 44–47.

<sup>28</sup> My transcription is lightly edited to assist intelligibility.

such as the South Sea Company, the East India Company and the Bank of England (as one immediately gleans from the subscription list of his *Six Solos*). The teaching conjointly of singing and the harpsichord was very normal in the eighteenth century. Both accomplishments were strongly “gendered” – in the direction of females – and inseparably linked by the fact that self-accompanied singing was the prevalent mode in a domestic setting, occasionally even being admitted to the concert hall.<sup>29</sup>

As a clearly sought-after music teacher, undistracted by the hurly-burly of concert life and beholden to no individual employer, Holcombe was able, on the evidence of the assets mentioned in his will, to amass over time a considerable fortune, possibly without, to our knowledge, receiving any especially large inheritances or gifts.<sup>30</sup> He aspired to become, and *de facto* became, a “gentleman” in the wider sense of a man not engaged in any occupation describable as menial and able, financially and culturally, to replicate the lifestyle of a gentleman in the original, narrower sense of a person of independent means, typically underpinned by rents from landed or urban property. Very revealing is the fact that on 14 June 1727 he was able to become a signatory, as “Hen. Holcombe”, to a published pledge of allegiance to the new king, George II, made by numerous self-described “principal Gentlemen of Quality”.<sup>31</sup> From this action alone one may infer that Henry was pro-Hanoverian and anti-Jacobite in sentiment, a supporter of the Whig party in politics, a Protestant in religion – and also a person socially qualified to stand alongside the rest of the signatories. This new-found status as a gentleman almost inevitably distanced Henry from the bulk of his musician colleagues. He joined the newly formed Academy of Vocal (later, Ancient) Music in 1726 and paid his subscriptions at least up to 1730, but appears to have drifted away thereafter.<sup>32</sup> He was a member of the benefit society later to become the Royal Society of Musicians from its foundation in 1739, but had apparently dropped out by 1742.<sup>33</sup>

We must now return to Henry’s family life. On 12 May 1716 he married Martha Haynes, born on 21 October 1695 in Middlesex, at the church of St Giles without Cripplegate, London.<sup>34</sup> This choice of marriage partner proved highly important for Henry’s future life, for Martha was, or soon became, a staunch Presbyterian, influencing his selection of poetic texts to set as a composer. Whereas the texts of some of his early songs are skittish, those of his later ones incline towards a more serious, often moralizing, tone.

<sup>29</sup> For example, on 1 May 1710, when Mrs Elizabeth Hemmings sang in Italian and English at a concert in York Buildings “several new Cantata’s, Songs, and other pieces of music”. The announcement in *The Tatler*, 27 April 1710 adds: “She also accompanies to her own Voice on the Harpsicord”.

<sup>30</sup> If any large bequest came Henry’s way, its would probably have been from the unknown person who acted initially in London as his guardian.

<sup>31</sup> *Historical Register*, 173–175. No other person named Henry Holcombe appears to fit the criteria for inclusion.

<sup>32</sup> Johnstone, *Academy of Ancient Music*, 123.

<sup>33</sup> Matthews, *Royal Society of Musicians*, 73.

<sup>34</sup> FS, England, Births and Christenings, 1538–1975 (for both events).

Henry also developed a taste for subscribing to religious writings, one passed on to his two eldest children.<sup>35</sup>

The couple's first child was Anne, christened at Holy Trinity in the Minories, London, on 6 December 1717.<sup>36</sup> She is the one person among Henry's close relatives known to have had a interest in music, to judge from the fact that she inherited "my Harpsichord which I promised her she should have at my Decease" plus "all my Books and Papers of Musick only".<sup>37</sup> She never married, and at the time of writing her own will, on 18 February 1755, was living separately from her father in the parish of St Andrew, Holborn.

Their second child was James, baptized at the Presbyterian meeting house in Carter Lane, Blackfriars, on 2 August 1725.<sup>38</sup> Hawkins probably errs in supposing that the minister then officiating at this church, a prominent rallying point for London's dissenters, was Dr (William) Harris (1675–1740), whose poem "Happy Hours, All Hours Excelling" was set by Henry – the appointed minister was in fact Samuel Wright – but it seems likely that Dr Harris was a frequent visitor to it, if not also an actual congregant.<sup>39</sup> On 2 February 1753 James, described as "Gentleman", was granted a licence to marry Phillippa Collet "aged about twenty two", the two nominated churches (between which to choose later) being the chapel of the Charterhouse in London and Kensington Parish Church.<sup>40</sup> Despite the slight discrepancy of age, this Phillippa appears to be identical with the Mary Phillippa, daughter of John and Susanna Collett (or Collet), who was given first an Anglican christening at Saint Andrew, Holborn, on 20 April 1728 and subsequently a Nonconformist baptism at the independent church in Kingston-upon-Thames on 10 March 1728 (1729).<sup>41</sup> Whether John Collett was a relative of the musicians Richard and Thomas Collett remains to discover. Nothing is known of James's occupational life except that at the beginning of September 1759 he was promoted at the Foreign Post Office from the junior rank of Clerk to that of Deputy Comptroller<sup>42</sup> – a post from which he was reported to be dismissed in November 1764.<sup>43</sup> James was buried on 2 January 1803 at St Luke's, Chelsea.<sup>44</sup> His will, written on

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<sup>35</sup> Henry subscribed to Thomas Doolittle's *Complete Body of Practical Divinity* in 1723 and to the dissenting minister Henry Grove of Taunton's *Sermons and Tracts* in 1741; his son James to the same Henry Grove's *System of Moral Philosophy* in 1749 and similar works thereafter; his daughter Anne (as "Miss Holcombe") to Elizabeth Harrison's *Miscellanies on Moral and Religious Subjects* in 1756.

<sup>36</sup> FS, England, Births and Christenings, 1538–1975. Anne's birth date was recorded as 15 November 1717.

<sup>37</sup> Quoted from Henry's will (see later).

<sup>38</sup> FS, England and Wales Non-Conformist Record Indexes (RG4–8), 1588–1977.

<sup>39</sup> Hawkins, *General History*, 187. For a chronological list of the ministers of this meeting house, see Wilson, *History and Antiquities*, 108.

<sup>40</sup> Ancestry Library (hereafter, AL), London and Surrey, England, Marriage Bonds and Allegations, 1597–1921. Marriage by licence (rather than with banns) was often preferred when bride and groom came from different parishes and wished to marry in a parish different from either.

<sup>41</sup> AL, England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538–1975 (for both).

<sup>42</sup> *Universal Chronicle or Weekly Gazette*, 1–8 September 1759, 283.

<sup>43</sup> *London Evening Post*, 6 November 1764.

<sup>44</sup> FS, England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539–1988.

25 August 1790 and proved on 20 May 1803, contains nothing of special interest except for showing that his wife was still living on the first date.<sup>45</sup>

Henry and Martha had a third child, Elizabeth, who is probably the infant of that name christened at St Katherine Coleman, London, on 4 July 1739.<sup>46</sup> At any rate, she was certainly still a minor on the day when Henry's will was signed (15 July 1754). If we assume that she was still a spinster when she died, as seems likely, it is nevertheless hard to choose the right person from among the many Elizabeth Holcombes who died in England during the ensuing decades. One possibility is a woman of exactly that name buried at St Matthew, Bethnal Green, on 18 September 1778; another is an Elizabeth Holcombe buried at Hawkridge, Somerset, on 6 February 1825.<sup>47</sup> The latter is described as aged eighty-six, which almost fits the putative birth date (or fits perfectly if the stated age is interpreted as the eighty-sixth year of life).

From the 1740s onwards most of what we can glean about Henry's life comes from his published compositions (there are no extant manuscripts of his compositions apart from ones copied from the prints by other hands). But there was an important development within his family. Martha Holcombe died in 1752 and was buried in her and Henry's parish church of St Paul, Covent Garden, on 16 August 1752.<sup>48</sup> Almost indecently soon afterwards, on 10 November 1752, Henry clandestinely married a certain Elizabeth Fitz, apparently a fellow parishioner, at St George's Chapel, Mayfair.<sup>49</sup> About the age, parentage and character of this Elizabeth nothing can at present be said.

Meanwhile, Henry began in 1745 to publish his works at intervals no longer singly but now in substantial collections: first of sonatas, then of songs of various types (in 1748, 1755 and very probably also 1753). This was a true Indian summer of composition, suggesting a desire to leave, before he died, a musical legacy affirming not merely his talent as a composer *tout court* but also his decades of work in intimate domestic settings as a teacher – and perhaps even, in the vocal compositions, his religiously informed philosophy of life.

On 15 July 1754, perhaps after warning signs of failing health, he wrote a will, proved on 7 August 1756.<sup>50</sup> Even before then he had become aware of the complications introduced by his recent second marriage. His task was to protect the future interests both of his two

<sup>45</sup> Kew, The National Archives, Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/1392/221.

<sup>46</sup> AL, England, Select Births and Christenings, 1538–1975. The register does, however, give Henry's surname as "Halcomb" and his wife's forename as "Mary", so caution is advised.

<sup>47</sup> FS, England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539–1988; FS, England, Somerset, Church Records, 1501–1999.

<sup>48</sup> AL, Westminster, London, England, Church of England Baptisms, Marriages and Burials, 1558–1812.

<sup>49</sup> AL, London, England, Clandestine Marriage and Baptism Registers, 1667–1754. "Clandestine" is a technical term denoting a wedding not so much secret as discreet, dispensing with banns or a licence but fulfilling the minimum requirement of being solemnized by an Anglican clergyman. Probably a majority of the wedding ceremonies held in London in the first half of the eighteenth century (clandestine marriages were prohibited there from 1754 onwards) were of this swiftly organized and inexpensive kind.

<sup>50</sup> Kew, The National Archives, Records of the Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PROB 11/824/173.

adult children and the minor, Elizabeth, and of his new wife (who was possibly no longer of child-bearing age, since the will makes no provision for further children), foreseeing and removing potentially contentious issues as much as possible. The interests of Anne and James had already been addressed through earlier substantial financial donations to each of them, which meant that, except for the harpsichord and music to be passed to Anne, nothing more needed to be done. The remaining question, then, was how to ensure that both Elizabeths, stepmother and stepdaughter (the latter initially as a minor and later as a marriageable adult), were guaranteed an equitable share of assets so as to remain on good terms. Henry's astute solution will be discussed shortly in conjunction with Anne's will, which was proved on 5 March 1759,<sup>51</sup> five days before her burial at St Andrew, Holborn.<sup>52</sup>

Henry himself died from unknown causes in 1756. Unexpectedly, he was buried on 21 July not at St Paul, Covent Garden, but at the St James Old Burial Ground in Bath. Although a James Holcombe who died in 1783 lies interred in the same cemetery, it does not appear that the purpose of Henry's burial in Bath was to reunite posthumously with relatives from that city. A more plausible explanation is that he died suddenly while visiting the city to take the waters, and that a decision was made on practical grounds not to transport his body back to his home parish.

### **The Wills of Henry and Anne**

Henry chooses as witnesses to his will the Irish actor Spranger Barry (1719–1777) and a John Roberts who is probably identical with the unidentified “John Roberts, Esq.” appearing in the subscription list for the *Six Solos*. The executrix is to be his wife Elizabeth. The gist of the will's stipulations is that after his death she should receive a capital stock of £800 in Old South Sea Annuities of the First Subscription, half of which she must make over to her stepdaughter Elizabeth at the point when the latter reaches the age of twenty-one or marries. At her own death his wife is asked to bequeath half of her South Sea stock to a person of her choice and half to her stepdaughter (if still living). She is also named as Henry's residuary beneficiary, meaning that the furniture, clothing, non-musical books etc. all become hers. Lesser sums are payable “for mourning” to son James (£20) and daughter Anne (£10). Two unnamed sisters at Chester (by elimination, probably Frances and Elizabeth) also receive money (£10) “for mourning”. That they are not allocated more suggests that their financial situation was at least satisfactory. There is nothing for one or more domestic servants, although their employment would doubtless continue as before under Elizabeth. It is noteworthy that Henry owns nothing in landed property, although he presumably had the wealth to acquire some: he probably did not wish to burden himself with the constant need for oversight that such ownership entailed.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, PROB 11/844/332.

<sup>52</sup> FS, England, Middlesex Parish Registers, 1539–1988.

<sup>53</sup> There is a proviso to this statement. In 1746 we find a Mr Holcombe at the Ring & Pearl (a traditional shop sign for a goldsmith or jeweller) opposite Tom's Coffee House in Russell Street, Bloomsbury, inviting enquiries for the letting of a farm in Hendon, Middlesex (*London Evening*

Anne chooses as her witnesses Thomas and Mary Liddington (*née* Wright), a Nonconformist couple who had married in Westminster in 1743.<sup>54</sup> The two executrices are her “dear and honoured Friends” Mrs Elizabeth Andrews and Miss Martha Steuart. The first lady is identifiable as the Mrs. Andrews (*née* Pettit), a member of the five-strong family who between them subscribed to six copies of Henry’s *Six Solos* at the voluntary “double” price of one guinea apiece. Her husband (who had died in 1753) was Joseph Andrews, Esq., of Shaw, Berkshire, the First Clerk in the office of the Paymaster General (thus a senior civil servant). Of the two listed sons, one, Joseph Andrews junior, was to be made a baronet in 1766, while the other, James Pettit Andrews (1737–1797), would become an eminent historian and antiquarian.<sup>55</sup> Anne leaves to her brother James a capital stock of £700 of South Sea Annuities of the First Subscription, currently held in the names of her executrices, on condition that he pay their father half of the interest received while he is still alive. She makes small bequests of five guineas apiece to five ladies, who include the two executrices.<sup>56</sup> The residuary beneficiary is her unmarried servant (and lady’s companion?), Mary Watts. A striking feature of Anne’s will is that every person named in it, apart from her brother and the husband of one witness, is female. One has the strong impression of a feminist *ante diem* in no hurry to assume wifely duties.

### The Subscription List of Henry’s *Six Solos*, Op. 1

Nothing is more revealing about a composer’s social connections (or absence of them) than a subscription list accompanying a publication.<sup>57</sup> It is, so to speak, a snapshot of a precise moment in his or her career. From a composer’s viewpoint, publication by subscription was both a safety net offering assurance that a publication would at least cover its costs and, equally importantly, a means of making or renewing contact with a wide and diverse network of sympathetic persons, whether patrons, employers, professional colleagues, co-religionists, pupils, amateur musicians, visitors from the same county or region, neighbours, friends or family members. From a subscriber’s viewpoint there was sometimes the advantage of a discount on the shop price, but even more satisfaction

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*Post*, 16–19 August 1746). But Tom’s Coffee House was also the chosen place, besides Henry’s house in nearby Southampton Street, at which to open a subscription and pay a deposit for the *Six Solos*. Moreover, Henry is listed as a ratepayer, and therefore house or flat owner, in Russell Street in 1748 (see *British History Online* at <https://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vol36/pp192-195#fn10>). These coincidences could be a red herring, or they could open up a fresh dimension to our musician’s biography.

<sup>54</sup> FS, England and Wales Non-Conformist Indexes (R4–8), 1588–1977. The marriage record gives the surname in the form “Lyddington”.

<sup>55</sup> Miss Pettit, listed as the 145th name and asterisked, is obviously a relative of Joseph senior by marriage. In lists of this kind, families subscribing collectively are often extended rather than nuclear, hence embracing more than one surname.

<sup>56</sup> A guinea, minted as an actual coin, was worth twenty-one shillings (i.e. one pound and one shilling).

<sup>57</sup> On the character and biographical value of subscription lists, see Talbot, “What Lists of Subscribers Can Tell Us”.

gained from becoming, in today's parlance, a participant in a "crowdfunding" enterprise – moreover, a person earning social credit through the publication of his or her name. Subscribers were not necessarily people who would actually make personal use of every item purchased.<sup>58</sup> The study of large numbers of such lists reveals the existence of what one could term "serial subscribers": persons who put their names down for an extraordinary range and number of publications. In such cases, one often suspects a covert charitable motivation: a wish to offer financial support to a worthy but needy person, as one might to a hospital or orphanage.

Planning to publish his six solo sonatas for violin with harpsichord accompaniment (but not mentioning the additional works following them in the collection, which could have resulted from a later decision), Holcombe placed a prospectus inviting subscriptions in the *Daily Advertiser* of 6 April 1745, having two days earlier taken out a royal privilege (its text placed between the title page and the list of subscribers) valid for the customary fourteen years. The advertised price was half a guinea. There was no press announcement of the completion of publication, but this probably occurred before the end of the same year. Holcombe had the audacious and unusual idea (perhaps because he had extended the content and therefore the cost of production well beyond what was originally envisaged) of asking subscribers voluntarily to pay a full guinea, marking the listed names of those who had done so with an asterisk.<sup>59</sup>

Some statistics: there are 207 names of subscribers, and therefore, as a starting point, receipts of 207 half-guineas. That number increases by nineteen if one takes into account extra copies bought. In nearly all cases these comprised one extra copy, but two subscribers ordered six copies. One was John Walsh the younger, who obviously bought them for retail in his shop. The other was Robert Downes, Lord Bishop of Raphoe, a town in County Down, Ireland. These were also obviously acquired for onward distribution. (The more remote from London an area was, the more likely it would be that visitors to the metropolis would execute commissions from their friends or make purchases "on spec" to pass on to them.) The number of asterisked names rises only to fifty-six, which may have come as a disappointment to Holcombe. So the grand total of income from subscriptions was (notionally) 282 half-guineas, or 141 guineas: an amount probably large enough to defray production costs completely but perhaps yielding little surplus. The difference between asterisked and non-asterisked subscribers is quite revealing, because, crudely speaking, it distinguishes those whose prime aim was to support the composer (such as the Andrews-Pettit family) from those more anxious to get value for money.

The list is organized alphabetically with only minor deviations. Within the entries for individual letters, as is very normal in such lists, a fixed hierarchical order is observed

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<sup>58</sup> When more than one member of the same family subscribes, the suspicion often arises that the true purpose is to purchase multiple copies for the head of the family while impressively maximising the number of family members included in the list. The Andrews family mentioned earlier are a case in point.

<sup>59</sup> Jeremy Barlow has kindly suggested to me in correspondence that the doubled price may indicate the use of superior (thicker) paper. That is indeed a possible explanation, except that it leads one to ask why this fairly common option was not offered in the original prospectus.

whereby titled men (knight, baronet or higher) and their family members come first, being followed in turn by gentlemen (identifiable by the “Esq.” suffix) and commoners (plain “Mr.”). Forenames are usually omitted, and where a “Miss” is followed immediately by a surname, the convention is that this is the eldest living unmarried daughter of her parents. Some entries assist identification by appending a place of residence or family seat following the preposition “of” or some other detail, but most do not.

Reflecting Holcombe’s activity as music teacher to the wealthy, the list is unusually heavily tilted towards the nobility and gentry. As a simple pointer to this fact, the prefix “Esq.” occurs eighty-one times, “Mr.” only thirty times. “Miss” makes thirty-four appearances: in many instances, these will have been Henry’s pupils or former pupils. Especially prominently represented among the subscribers are members of the banking fraternity and their families. The sixteenth and seventeenth names are those of Peter Burrell and John Bristow, respectively sub-governor and deputy governor of the South Sea Company, who – uniquely in the list – proclaim their posts with meticulous attention to detail. (One can imagine them proudly striding in side by side to pay their deposits.) Four subscribers are connected to this one company, and one wonders whether the several hundred pounds worth of stock in it owned by Henry were acquired as a special gift or concession.

In contrast, professional musicians are very thin on the ground, numbering only five. All of them probably subscribed through actual friendship rather than mere professional solidarity. The most interesting is the Italian-born violinist and composer Giovanni Stefano Carbonelli (naturalized as John Stephen Carbonell), whose employer, John Manners, Duke of Rutland, is also a subscriber. My suspicion is that Carbonelli – by now, like Holcombe, upwardly mobile and generally retired from concert life – advised him on violinistic matters concerning the sonatas and perhaps even gave him lessons on the instrument.<sup>60</sup> Another is the singer and actor Thomas Lowe. John Ernest Galliard, the German-born oboist and composer, repays Holcombe in kind for having subscribed in 1728 to three copies of his *Hymn of Adam and Eve* by ordering two copies of the sonatas. Finally, there are two organists from the West Country: Nelme Rogers at Bristol Cathedral and George Combes at the Minster in Wimborne Minster (close to Combe Almer, cautiously proposed as the “Comb” entered into Henry Holcombe senior’s marriage attestation). In general, the subscription list is more heavily populated by persons with West Country links than mere chance would predict. There is no suggestion that Henry Holcombe himself made or sustained personal connections by travelling frequently to the West Country, but movement in the opposite direction, from the rest of the country to London, was very normal during this age, especially during the winter months, and helped to keep alive a loose but genuine kind of solidarity based on regional affiliation.

The list also contains the names of six prominent musical amateurs: the customs officials Henry Needler (a violinist) and Bendall Martyn (a string player and composer), the Rev. Dr. Smith (a mathematician who organized a music society in Cambridge), the Hon. Edward Walpole and the artist Marcellus Laroon the younger (both proficient cellists) and the harpsichordist, composer and aesthete James Harris.

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<sup>60</sup> On Carbonelli’s life and music, see Talbot, “From Giovanni Stefano Carbonelli”.



Holcombe's interest in religion is reflected in the six churchmen who subscribed. One is Benjamin Grosvenor, an influential Presbyterian. Another is the theologian Thomas Sharp, father of the abolitionist Granville Sharp. We also encounter Benjamin Hoadly, very active as a poet and librettist.

As for the other subscribers, most professions and trades find their place. We have artists (James Hudson, Jonathan Richardson the younger, Isaac Whood, the previously mentioned Laroon and the German-born enameller Christian Frederick Zinke, a "serial subscriber" to music), poets, playwrights, booksellers, antiquarians, academics, lawyers, landowners, politicians, court officials, artisans and merchants. Two men working for the Post Office, Isaac Jamineau and Charles Roberts, must have been colleagues of Henry's son James. Finally, the list includes among the asterisked names William and Elizabeth Villareal, son and daughter by her first marriage of Kitty Da Costa Villareal, most famous of the converts from Judaism to Anglican Christianity that eighteenth-century Britain witnessed. Interestingly, one surviving copy of the *Six Solos* contains the bookplate of Edwyn Francis Stanhope (1729–1807) with an added annotation in Latin recording that it was a gift, made on 19 November 1746, from his friend William Villareal.<sup>61</sup> What is unclear is whether this was the actual subscription copy obtained by William (or, possibly, that of his sister) or a new copy specially purchased from the composer or a dealer.

### **The Independent Songs**

The commentary on Henry Holcombe's music forming the second part of this article begins with those of his songs that appeared initially in songsheets, journals or periodical publications. The words of all the settings, with or without Holcombe's music, were reprinted, many repeatedly, in pirated editions and anthologies up to the end of the century and even beyond, and several songs were retexted or otherwise arranged.<sup>62</sup> Table 1 lists, as far as possible chronologically, the first editions of all those I have traced. Their number is small, but we do not know how many similar songs remained in manuscript and have been lost. The losses may extend to some of those published only as songsheets on one or two sides of paper, typically in the form of a two-stave score with the words of the first stanza underlaid, followed by the remaining stanzas (very variable in number) and finally, space permitting, by a version of the melody for recorder or flute. Most songs were provided from the start – if not by the poet, then by the composer or publisher – with a separate title summarizing their content or moralistic lesson. Such titles, mere paratexts, were apt to change at the whim of a compiler or publisher in the course of a song's onward transmission.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> The copy is owned by Jeremy Barlow, who very kindly sent me a reproduction of the bookplate.

<sup>62</sup> To avoid prolixity, my discussion focuses where possible on the songs in their earliest incarnation and mentions their later evolution only selectively.

<sup>63</sup> In Table 1 the title in column 3 is always that in the earliest known source, listed in column 5. The names of the poets, supplied in column 4, are never given by Holcombe himself in any of his publications unless they form part of the title.

**Table 1**

Henry Holcombe's published independent songs (c. 1720–1741).

Date	Incipit	Separate title	Poet	Primary source
c. 1720	To lordlings proud I tune my song	<i>Duke upon Duke</i>	James Craggs the younger?	Songsheet published possibly by A. Moore
1730	Happy hours, all hours excelling	<i>The Happy Man</i>	William Harris	<i>The Musical Miscellany</i> , 4:166
1731	Little syren of the stage	<i>To Signora Cuzzoni</i>	Ambrose Phillips	<i>The Musical Miscellany</i> , 5:116
1734	How can they taste of joys or grief	<i>Charming Neaera</i>	Unknown	<i>The British Musical Miscellany</i> , 2:129
1737	When Delia on the plain appears	<i>The Doubtful Shepherd</i>	George Lyttleton, 1st Baron Lyttleton	<i>The Musical Entertainer</i> (London: Corbett, 1737), 1:37
1739	Go, happy paper, gently steal	<i>Happy Paper</i>	Unknown	<i>Calliope or English Harmony</i> (London: Simpson, 1739), 2:163
c. 1740	Guardian Angels now protect me	<i>The Forsaken Nymph</i>	Unknown	Songsheet published by J. Simpson
1743	When here, Lucinda, first we came	<i>Arno's Vale</i>	Charles Sackville, Earl of Middlesex	<i>The British Orpheus</i> (London: Walsh, 1741– 1743), 1:3

*Duke upon Duke*, which briefly enjoyed astonishing popularity, is a witty parody of a border ballad such as *Chevy Chase*.<sup>64</sup> The “dukes” in question were two parliamentarians, Nicholas Lord Lechmere and Sir John Guise, who had a famous public spat. The authorship of the new ballad has not yet been established definitively. Both Alexander Pope and Jonathan Swift, fellow members of the Scriblerus Club (a London literary society), have been credited with it, but an unidentified example of a 1723 reprint by A. Moore has a handwritten annotation on the title page claiming the author to be “the Right Hon[our]able James Craggs Esq., one of the Principal Secr[etaries] of State and revised and corrected by Thomas Tickell”.<sup>65</sup> With its thirty-seven stanzas, the ballad could well be the work of multiple authors. An earlier edition by an unidentified publisher, datable to c. 1720, introduces the poem by what at first glance appears to be a tune-only presentation of the song (which, as in 1723, is attributed to “Mr Holdecombe”), but turns out to be an intentionally meaningless collage of fragments of musical notation, some of them inverted – thus functioning not as music at all but instead as an emblem of discord alluding to the poem’s subject.

<sup>64</sup> Border ballads are anonymous medieval narrative poems whose typical subject is skirmishing in the Anglo-Scottish borderlands.

<sup>65</sup> Digitized by *Eighteenth Century Collections Online* (ECCO).

Holcombe's chirpy tune and simple but solid bass are worth quoting entire as Music example 2. They are full of attractive detail. The asymmetry caused by the repetition of the quatrain's last line, launched by the interrupted cadence in bar 8, is pleasing; even more so, the word-painting for "Pride will have a fall" (which returns at the end of the song as the poem's punchline), culminating in a delicious descent of a sixth in bar 9. The appended ritornello, presumably for harpsichord, is doubtless intended to be used only intermittently to allow the singer to recover breath.<sup>66</sup>

### Music example 2

Henry Holcombe, song *Duke upon Duke* (from the 1723 edition by A. Moore).

The musical score for "Duke upon Duke" is presented in three systems. The first system (bars 1-4) features a vocal line with the lyrics "To Lord - lings proud I tune my song Who feast in bow'r or hall; Tho' dukes they be, yet" and a bass line. The second system (bars 5-8) continues the vocal line with "dukes shall see That pride will have a fall, that pride will have a fall." and the bass line. The third system (bars 9-12) shows the vocal line as a whole rest and the bass line as a ritornello. The score includes a repeat sign at the end of the first system.

His next two songs were published in the penultimate and last volumes of a remarkable six-volume compilation published in London between 1729 and 1731 by John Watts: *The Musical Miscellany*. Watts's stated *modus operandi*, already announced in the first volume, was to invite "gentlemen", by which he meant amateur poets, to submit their previously unpublished song texts to him, leaving him to find willing composers to supply the tunes (after volume 2, both the tunes and their basses, sometimes figured). In practice, however, he seems often to have received completed songs, some of which were perhaps despatched to him by their composers rather than their poets. *The Happy Man*, on a text by the William Harris (1675–1740) previously mentioned as a leading Presbyterian, is a beautifully sculpted song full of subtlety. For instance, Holcombe does not take the easy option of making the music for lines 3 and 4, cadencing finally in the dominant key (D,

<sup>66</sup> As was normal for English usage at the time, the double barlines in the source, reproduced without alteration in Music example 2, are probably to be interpreted as repeat signs – in this particular case, optional rather than mandatory.

in G minor), echo exactly that for lines 1 and 2. The tonal direction for both couplets is exactly the same, but whereas line 2 descends in the vocal line to d', reflecting the downcast mood of "crowds and noise", line 4 is taken up to d", exulting in "self-possessing joys". A willingness to employ micro-variation for expressive ends is a feature of Holcombe's entire song production. "Little Syren of the Stage" is a tribute by the popular poet Ambrose Philips (1674–1749) to the Italian soprano Francesca Cuzzoni, Handel's most trusted diva, written in the wake of her departure from London in the summer of 1728 as a result of the closure of the Royal Academy of Music.<sup>67</sup> In this very well constructed single-stanza song *alla gavotta* Holcombe mimics in a simple but eloquent way the extempore variation introduced into their performance by Italian singers, ending wittily with an unexpected burst of unison writing at a distance of two octaves to express the sentiment of the regretful (because clearly ironic) final line of text: "Leave the Britons rough and free".

From 1734 comes "How Can They Taste of Joys or Grief" (*Charming Neaera*), published in the second volume of John Walsh the elder's six-volume song anthology entitled *The British Musical Miscellany*.<sup>68</sup> The fourth of its five musical phrases illustrates Holcombe's finesse, since whereas all the other phrases are four bars in length, mirroring the regular quatrains of each stanza (whose last line is repeated), this penultimate one is extended to five bars, creating expectancy just before the melodic climax on the note g" arrives.

The same song, retexted (as "When Delia on the Plain Appears") to the words of a poem by George Lyttleton and retitled (as "The Doubtful Shepperd"), came out in 1737 in George Bickham's anthology *The Musical Entertainer*. In this second form it gained many reprints, including one in the first volume of Henry Roberts's two-volume anthology *Calliope, or English Harmony* (1739). This *contrafactum* illustrates how accepted and widespread the practice of retexting, overt or covert, had become.

A London music engraver like Bickham, Roberts included in the second volume of *Calliope* what appears to have been an entirely new song: *Happy Paper* ("Go, Happy Paper, Gently Steal"). Employing asymmetrical phrase structure in a way similar to *Charming Neaera*, *Happy Paper* describes how a bashful lover slips an avowal of his feelings underneath the pillow of his lady love. Holcombe depicts the furtive act of placing the letter delightfully with a swift, undulating conjunct motion. In the song's second half he uses wider melodic intervals in both tune and bass to express an outburst of passion. The anonymous text of *Happy Paper* achieved instant fame the next year though its insertion into Samuel Richardson's famous epistolary novel *Pamela*.

*The Forsaken Nymph* ("Guardian Angels Now Protect Me") may be an interloper into Table 1 since its attribution to Holcombe is questionable. In 1739 a setting in F major of the same text attributed to Handel (HWV 228/10, today generally regarded as spurious by Handelians) appeared in the first volume of *Calliope*.<sup>69</sup> Shortly afterwards,

<sup>67</sup> This song also exists separately in undated songsheet form, probably reprinted from *The Musical Miscellany*.

<sup>68</sup> With thanks to Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson for alerting me to this setting's existence.

<sup>69</sup> This Handel-attributed setting had actually first appeared, described as "A New Song", at the end of 1737 in *The Monthly Mask*, a periodical publication issued by John Walsh the younger.

the songsheet of a different setting, in G minor, was published. Despite their difference of mode, the two settings are similar not only in structure but also in certain turns of phrase, suggesting that the second is loosely modelled on the first. The G-minor setting exists in two published versions. What is probably the earlier does not bear a composer's name but includes that of the London music seller and publisher John Simpson, who was later to bring out Holcombe's collection *The Garland*.<sup>70</sup> The revised version, obviously engraved by the same person but with major alterations to the page's layout, omits Simpson's imprint but adds "set by M.<sup>r</sup> Holcombe" to the title. It also disfigures the bass part by accidentally inserting the content of bars 2 and 3 into bars 3 and 4.<sup>71</sup> Holcombe's authorship is placed in doubt on purely musical grounds by the (for him) abnormally high density of appoggiaturas and slides in the tune, the ungainly, very pedestrian quality of the bass and the unrelieved four-squareness of the phrasing. A reprint of the setting, this time attributed in the index of the songs to [Henry] Carey, appeared under a new title, *Leander*, and with an almost totally rewritten bass part in the first volume of John Tyther's two-volume anthology *Amaryllis* (1746). This altered version illustrates a general truth: that within the domain of the simpler English songs the tune was for many people everything, the bass merely an optional, readily exchangeable and even sometimes discardable support.

For completeness, a later – and superior – setting, in A major, of *Guardian Angels* should be mentioned. This setting, retexted (beginning: "Where's the mortal can resist me?") and transposed to B flat major, was sung in 1773 as a replacement air for the famous Anne Catley in Kane O'Hara's burletta *The Golden Pippin*.

*Arno's Vale* ("When here, Lucinda, first we came") was without doubt Holcombe's most successful individual song. Its poem was written by Lord Lyttleton as a spontaneous elegy on the extinction of the Medici dynasty with the death of Gian Gastone, last duke of Tuscany, in 1737. In 1773 the travel writer John Boyle, Earl of Cork and Orrery, remarked how this poem, which had been blessed with "the good fortune to be set by the late Mr. Holcombe with a plaintive sweetness that does honour to his taste and justice to the subject", was "as well known to our musicians as it is to our poets".<sup>72</sup> The song first appeared in print in 1741, in Book 1 of John Walsh the younger's six-volume anthology *The British Orpheus*. It is Holcombe's earliest known song to display in quantity the typical stylistic features of the *galant* style such as Lombardic rhythms, strings of triplets and drum basses, and in that respect looks forward to his later collections. Among later arrangements of it were a duet for unaccompanied flutes published by John Simpson later in 1745 and a glee for four voices by Philip Hayes published in 1777 in John Arnold's anthology *The Essex Harmony*.<sup>73</sup>

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This setting is discussed in some detail in Marx and Voss, *Compositions Attributed to G. F. Handel*, 32–33.

<sup>70</sup> This version is the one in London, British Library, G. 316.i.(7). My thanks to Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson for supplying me with reproductions of both songsheet versions of this setting.

<sup>71</sup> This version is the one in London, British Library, G. 326.h.(36) iii.

<sup>72</sup> Boyle, *Letters from Italy*, 267.

<sup>73</sup> *Delightful Pocket Companion*, 30; Arnold, *Essex Harmony*, 31–33.

In April 1755 *The London Magazine* published, without identifying either the poet or the composer, what it billed as a new song: *The Constant Shepherdess* (“Cease, Damon, to pursue me”).<sup>74</sup> This turns out to be a simple reprint, omitting bass figures, of a song included seven years earlier in Holcombe’s collection *The Garland*, a publication protected in theory by a still valid royal privilege. Quite possibly, the claim for its newness was made in good faith: the intricate paths of transmission traversed by English songs of the seventeenth and (especially) eighteenth centuries are often hard to discern today and doubtless were no less so at the time.

### The *Six Solos* and Their Adjuncts (1745)

Holcombe’s invitation to subscribe to his first published collection must have taken admirers of his songs somewhat by surprise, since it was more normal for professional musicians to open their account as composers of collections with areas of repertoire with which the public already associated them as performers. By 1745, however, the memory of Henry’s performances as a singer, as distinct from his sporadic contributions as a composer of songs, must already have faded, leaving him effectively with a *tabula rasa*. Quite possibly, it was his contact with Carbonelli, whose twelve published violin sonatas (1729) provide inspiring models, that propelled him in the direction he chose to take.

The text of the title page is straightforward enough, reading:

Six Solos | FOR A | Violin and Thorough Bass | With some Pieces for the | German Flute  
and Harpsicord | COMPOS'D BY | HENRY HOLCOMBE | OPERA PRIMA | LONDON  
Printed by W.<sup>m</sup> Smith Musick Printer at the golden Bass in Middle Row Holbourne and  
| sold only by the Author at his House in Southampton Street Bloomsbury

This was therefore a private publication for which the composer retained the engraved plates. It is interesting to learn from the imprint that the composer’s own house was planned to be the sole point of sale, for it was more usual to name at least one alternative outlet such as a coffee shop.

At first glance, the six sonatas for solo violin and figured bass in Op. 1 look conservatively neo-Corellian in their make-up.<sup>75</sup> Major and minor keys, in the sequence c–G–E–a–d–D, are represented equally, whereas by 1745 one might have expected a preponderance of the major mode. All six works have a four-movement plan observing the tempo sequence Slow–Fast–Slow–Fast, whereas one might have expected three-movement plans (either Fast–Slow–Fast or Slow–Fast–Fast) at least to register a presence. The movements are either in binary form (all the fast movements and some of the slower

<sup>74</sup> “A New Song”, *The London Magazine* 24 (1755): 180.

<sup>75</sup> Neo-Corellian in the sense of adhering to the consensus inspired by Corelli’s music that formed early in the eighteenth century, while not necessarily imitating every jot and tittle of the Italian master’s own practice (such as a preference for five rather than four movements in his solo sonatas).

ones) or in a unitary form without sectional repeats but having exactly the same tonal trajectory as the binary-form movements – except for the finale of Sonata 1, which adopts French *rondeau* form, very popular in England. Quadruple or duple metre dominates the first pair of movements, triple or compound metre the second pair. Final movements can be styled (as *corrente* or minuet) or even identified by name (in the “Jigg” movements of Sonatas 2 and 5) as dances – a sign of convergence between the *da chiesa* and *da camera* traditions already incipient in Corelli’s Op. 5 violin sonatas (1700). Internal slow movements are generally placed in the relative major or minor key, although the third movement of Sonata 5, following a traditional practice in chamber sonatas, remains in the home key; that of Sonata 4, a brief transition between two fast movements, ends emphatically on the dominant chord of the home key but begins in a state of tonal flux (see Music example 3).

Standing in contrast to this is the very up-to-date, *galant* character of the melodic and figurational writing for the violin, replete with the characteristics noted earlier for *Arno’s Vale*, with the addition of some technically specific and idiomatic devices such as double and multiple stopping, mid-phrase trills (often in close succession), slurred staccato and rapid cross-string arpeggiation. Music example 3, which testifies to Holcombe’s lively musical imagination, illustrates some of these points. His sonatas are equally noteworthy for the complex, ever-changing rhythms of their finely chiselled melodic lines and the subtlety and care applied to their phrasing, worthy of an experienced practitioner. Surprisingly, in the context of his times, Holcombe makes only very sparing use of sequence. Phrases are not often repeated in exact sequence more than once, although less exact immediate reiteration of motivic material is plentiful.

Where Holcombe’s style comes closest to Carbonelli’s is in certain *con slancio* movements mimicking the panache of fast movements in concertos following the Vivaldian tradition. A typical instance is the opening of the second movement of Sonata 6, with its arresting “three hammer-blows” (“Dreierschlag”) in the first bar (Music example 4).

The volume continues with twelve movements, all short and sometimes miniaturistic, collectively headed (on page 24) “Aires for a German Flute or Harpsicord” – not “and Harpsicord” as on the title page. Neither preposition is semantically unambiguous, but the intention is clear. The first ten movements constitute three chamber sonatas for transverse flute and accompanying harpsichord comprising respectively three, three and four movements in the same key (replicating Corelli’s normal usage in his trio sonatas of Opp. 2 and 4). The last two make up a lone solo harpsichord sonata containing the two movements normal in mid-century Italian keyboard sonatas, such as those of Domenico Alberti and Domenico Paradies or their English imitations by George Berg and many others.

One common seventeenth- or eighteenth-century meaning of “aria” and its French or English cognate “air” is a theme or movement in binary form structurally resembling a dance movement but not necessarily identifiable with any particular dance on the basis of tempo, metre, rhythm or general character. “Air” thus becomes a catch-all term for a usually concise, often perfectly symmetrical, binary-form movement. To divide a long sequence of such airs into discrete multi-movement works of suite or chamber-sonata type (assuming that this is the composer’s intention), all that one has to do is to continue

**Music example 3**

Henry Holcombe, third movement of Sonata 4 from his *Six Solos* (1745).

Lento

**Music example 4**

Henry Holcombe, opening section of the second movement of Sonata 6 from his *Six Solos* (1745).

Allegro



to add movements for as long as the same tonic persists and then start a new work at the exact point where a new tonic arrives. This is how Rameau's second and third *Livres de clavecin* each form themselves naturally into two suites without any need for supplementary verbal or numerical cues.<sup>76</sup> The same method of creating multi-movement works on the basis of a shared tonic out of what are ostensibly free-standing consecutive movements applies also to the keyboard sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti and to numerous collections of "lessons" published by eighteenth-century English composers.<sup>77</sup>

The idiom of Holcombe's three chamber sonatas, making allowance for their reduced scale, is that of his violin sonatas purged of specifically violinistic features such as double stopping and rapid arpeggiation including wide skips and with a compensatory increase in linear, *cantabile* writing suited to a woodwind instrument. The flute sonatas also have a slightly more active bass line, bridging over the brief moments when the player of the solo instrument needs to draw breath. Regarding tempo, they are laid out on the more modern Slow–Fast–Fast plan (where both "Slow" and "Fast" can be fairly elastic in their interpretation). Less flamboyant and technically demanding than their counterparts for violin, the flute sonatas are very persuasive in their gentler way.

The technically rather simple harpsichord sonata in B minor that concludes the volume is a little jewel, causing regret that nothing else for solo keyboard by Holcombe is known. In terms of keyboard writing, it is nicely varied, with some interesting things for the left hand to do, although – a conservative feature – there is no sharing of melodies or figurations between the hands. Appropriately for keyboard music, it features turns and a few instances of the so-called English beat in addition to the ever-present trills.

Two final questions need an answer. First, why is the content of Op. 1 so heterogeneous in instrumentation and level of difficulty? My suspicion, to pick up on a point made earlier, is that Holcombe, as his prospectus for the collection seems to show, originally planned to publish simply the violin sonatas, perhaps with an eye to reintegrating himself with his erstwhile professional colleagues and even re-entering the arena of concert life. But, as the subscription list shows, the response from the community of professional musicians was very weak. It was perhaps at this point, when the number of subscriptions may not yet have reached the threshold of viability enabling engraving and publication to go ahead, that Holcombe decided to reorient the collection towards his pupils and their families, in aid of which he added the works for flute and for solo keyboard. Evidently, this strategy paid off, albeit at some cost to musical coherence.

The second question is harder to answer. Why did Holcombe provide no sequel to this excellent collection of instrumental music during the eleven years of life left to him? Perhaps the lack of support for the violin sonatas from London's musicians had left a bitter taste. Or was it, rather, a case of loving instrumental music no less but loving vocal music even more, particularly as it could act as a bridge to the realms of poetry and religion, both very close to his heart?

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<sup>76</sup> Similarly for the extracts from Tomaso Albinoni's *Balletti a tre* (1701) that John Walsh the elder published in 1702 as "Albinoni's Aires in 3 Parts".

<sup>77</sup> I write "shared tonic" rather than "shared tonality" because in some instances the movements collectively making up the work mix the major and minor modes.

## The Song Collection *The Garland* (1748)

A transcription of the title page of Holcombe's first song collection reveals some interesting details. It reads:

The | GARLAND | A | Collection of | Songs and Cantatas | COMPOS'D BY | M.<sup>r</sup> Holcombe | London Printed for J. Simpson in Sweeting Alley | opposite the East Door of the Royal Exchange. | Of whom may be had compos'd by M.<sup>r</sup> Holcombe | Six SOLOS for a Violin & a Bass with some pieces for the German Flute & Harpsicord | [other works by different composers follow]

We saw earlier how Holcombe had dealings with Simpson starting in the 1730s, but now the publisher is financing a collection by Holcombe from his own pocket (that is the significance of the preposition “for”) and, as a music seller, is also stocking the *Six Solos*, of which he has probably acquired the plates. This pattern whereby a composer paid all the costs of his first opus but only a few years later was able to sell its plates plus, perhaps, a new collection to a willing publisher was a very familiar one in London's music trade during that period.

Discussion of *The Garland* can conveniently start with a glance at Table 2, which lists its contents. Whereas his independent songs had mostly resulted from direct collaboration with a poet, which dictated precisely the text to be set, now he had to assemble his own anthology by foraging among the poems accessible to him – some already set to music but others not – and selecting either whole poems or (in the case of no. 11) an extract from a longer poem. There is no over-arching theme explored in the chosen poems, but most deal in a conventional fashion with the pleasures and pains of love in a vaguely classical pastoral vein. Two, however, address the human condition in a moralizing spirit consonant with Holcombe's own religious leanings (nos. 6 and 11).

The texts, or at least some of them, afford a glimpse into Holcombe's personal library. Some had appeared in widely circulated single-author published collections (Mallet, Akenside), others in periodicals or song-text anthologies. One surmises from nos. 9 and 11 that Holcombe was a former subscriber to Ambrose Philips's strongly pro-Whig periodical *The Free-Thinker*, and from no. 10 that he had obtained more volumes of *The Musical Miscellany* than simply the two containing his own songs. Nos. 5 and 6, which come from the same volume of *The Universal Magazine*, suggest that he had this publication available at home.

All the songs save two (nos. 1 and 10) are of the most conventional type: in binary form and strophic (though not with the large number of stanzas found in some ballads). The two items in question, both headed “Cantata”, are more elaborate. At this point, it will be useful to outline the ways (beyond the simply linguistic) in which the mid-eighteenth-century English cantata differed from its Italian counterpart. In the first few decades of that century, when the genre was still a novelty, some attempt was made by native poets and, crucially, the earliest composers (such as J. C. Pepusch, Daniel Purcell and J. E. Galliard) to establish in the English language a distinctive poetic structure reserved for cantatas prescribing exactly which stanzas were to be set as recitative (including arioso) and which as aria. Unfortunately (as it appears in retrospect), no system for English cantatas evolved

**Table 2**The content of Henry Holcombe's song collection *The Garland* (1748).

No.	Incipit	Title	Poet	Selected concordances
1	A youth adorn'd with ev'ry grace	<i>Cantata</i>	David Mallet	In Mallet's <i>Poems on Several Occasions</i> (1753), used earlier in the <i>Masque of Alfred</i> (1740)
2	Cease, Damon, to pursue me	<i>The Constant Shepherdess</i>	Unknown	Reprinted with Holcombe's music in <i>The London Magazine</i> 24 (1755), 180
3	You tell me I'm handsome	<i>The Judicious Fair One</i>	Edward Moore	Later concordances confirm Moore's authorship of the poem
4	The shape alone let others prize	<i>The Choice, or Beauty and Sense United</i>	Mark Akenside	In Akenside's <i>Friendship and Love</i> (1745)
5	Where is pleasure, tell me where	<i>The Disinterested Lover</i>	Unknown	Words alone in <i>The Universal Magazine</i> 1 (1747), 186–187
6	The parent bird whose little nest	<i>Paternal Love</i>	Unknown	Setting by J. F. Lampe in <i>The Universal Magazine</i> 1 (1747), 184
7	Sweetest charmer, pride of Nature	<i>The Consolation, or the Disagreeable Disappointment</i>	Unknown	Words alone in the song-text anthology <i>The Warbling Muses</i> (1759), 299
8	Farewell, ye green fields and sweet groves	<i>The Unhappy Maid</i>	Unknown	/
9	Ye little lovers that round her wait	<i>The Careless Lover</i>	Ambrose Philips	In <i>The Free-Thinker</i> 3 (1719), 213
10	Can then a look create a thought	<i>Cantata</i>	Barton Booth	In <i>The Musical Miscellany</i> 1 (1729), 166
11	Man only from himself can suffer wrong	<i>Self Conviction</i>	Ambrose Philips	Extract from <i>An Epistle from a Gentleman in Holland to His Friend in England, in the Year 1703</i> , published in <i>The Free-Thinker</i> 1 (1718), 369–373

whereby one particular metre – this could have been iambic pentameter – was reserved by consensus for recitative (as a counterpart to the mixture of seven-syllable and eleven-syllable lines in Italian *poesia per musica*), leaving a free choice of any other metre for arias. So there were no fixed landmarks regarding the placement of recitatives and arias for English composers to follow. By the middle of the century, they had reverted to the practices of the multi-sectional song inherited from the seventeenth century. Composers simply chose autonomously which parts of the chosen stanza or stanzas of a poem (not necessarily one originally intended for music) to set in either of the two manners. Thus when Holcombe or other English composers of his generation label a setting a “cantata”,

they may mean nothing more than that (a) recitative occurs somewhere or other; (b) the work is divided into discrete movements; and – but only optionally – (c) that some use is made of ritornellos (commonly called in England “symphonies”) and/or *da capo* structures.<sup>78</sup>

Accordingly, the three identically structured stanzas (sestets in iambic tetrameter) making up Mallet’s poem are set, respectively, as a recitative, a slow aria in binary form with “symphonies”, and a slightly quicker aria of similar design, composed in the tonic minor in order to accentuate the threnodic character of the text. Holcombe’s recitative (see Music example 5) bespeaks great familiarity with Italian usage: we find a sudden quickening before the first cadence in bar 4, and the final cadence is of the familiar “telescoped” kind where an appoggiatura is needed in the vocal part to mitigate the apparent clash between tonic and dominant harmony. More typically Italian than English is the recitative’s final cadence in B minor in preference to the G major in which the first aria begins. The tonal relationship between the end of a recitative and the start of an aria can be used powerfully for affective ends: here, the instantaneous transition from a B minor chord to D major (dominant) harmony in G major brings about a highly effective lightening of the mood in keeping with the tenderness of the protagonist’s eulogy of her lover, fallen in war.<sup>79</sup>

### Music example 5

Henry Holcombe, recitative opening the cantata “A Youth Adorn’d with Ev’ry Grace”, no. 1 in *The Garland* (1748).

RECIT[ATIVE]

A youth a-dorn'd with ev'ry grace To warm and win the cold-est heart In se-cret  
 mine pos-sessed. The mor-ning bud, that fair-est blows, The ver-nal  
 oak that straight-est blows, His face and shape ex-press.

<sup>78</sup> The most compendious study of the English cantata to date – Goodall, *Eighteenth-Century English Secular Cantatas* – does not, in my opinion, make enough of this fundamental and enduring difference between the Italian and English cantata traditions.

<sup>79</sup> On tonal aspects of the recitative-aria interface, see Talbot, “How Recitatives End”.

The second cantata (no. 10) is tripartite in exactly the same way, except that the opening movement headed “Recit:” is no ordinary recitative but instead an *arioso* in # metre, where ostinato crotchets creating a drum bass are present in most bars. Once again, the two binary-form arias are nicely differentiated: the first coquettish, the second vigorous and quasi-martial.

In both the cantatas and the majority of the strophic songs “symphonies” play an important role. These are of various kinds. Sometimes, they consist only of a figured bass, the upper staff remaining blank. At other times, they comprise both a bass and a treble line that may on occasion marginally overlap with the vocal line at either end. In the vast majority of domestic performances, including self-accompanied ones, the treble line was doubtless taken by the keyboard player, but it is possible that when a violinist was available, the stringed instrument, reading over the keyboard player’s shoulder from the same score, sometimes took over the top part. Finally, there are rare occasions – as towards the end of no. 11 – when a middle instrumental strand as well as an upper one is supplied. Once again, the harpsichord can supply all the written-out notes, but if a violin plays, a second violin or a viola can suitably take the middle strand. Around 1805 Thomas Busby (1754–1838), a singer, organist and composer better known today for the several dictionaries and histories of music that he wrote or co-wrote, compiled an anthology entitled *Melodia Britannica, or the Beauties of British Song*, which included an arrangement of Holcombe’s opening cantata. This maintains two violins (or violin and viola) in the accompaniment even while the voice is singing. Busby’s version testifies equally strongly to his questionable taste as an arranger (although it could be said in his defence that such treatment was normal for his age) and the durable appeal of some of Holcombe’s songs.

The nine strophic songs in the collection are sufficiently similar to the ones from the previous two decades not to need separate discussion. They all display the usual craftsmanship, including a subtle and judicious use of word-painting.

### **The Puzzling Case of the *Twelve Italian Canzonets (1753)***

From 7 May up to 13 August 1753 the *Public Advertiser* ran a series of advertisements for a group of new publications by John Walsh the younger that included “Twelve Italian Canzonets, with some English Ballads, never before printed, by M. Holcombe”. The significance of “Holcombe” looks clear enough, but why “M.” and not “Mr.”?<sup>80</sup> Was the omission of an “r” a typographical error lazily left uncorrected? Or was there, perhaps, an overlooked Maurice or Marmaduke Holcombe?

Things get more, rather than less, mystifying if one looks at the title page of the publication itself in its earlier and later forms. Originally, it read: “TWELVE ITALIAN | CANZONETS. | To which is added | A Collection of ENGLISH SONGS. | Compos’d by | A. H. | London. Printed for I. Walsh in Catherine Street in the Strand. [...]”<sup>81</sup> So now

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<sup>80</sup> In Smith and Humphries, *Bibliography*, 167 (no. 746) and 189 (no. 839), the “M.” is inexactly transcribed as “Mr.”.

<sup>81</sup> Example in London, British Library, D. 836.jj.(4).

“Holcombe” is pared down to “H.” and preceded not by “M.” but by “A.” Was there a Holcombe with musical inclinations possessing this initial? Yes: Henry’s daughter Anne, then aged thirty-five. Could she be styled “M.”? Yes, if this was an attempt to devise a deliberately ambiguous title (remembering the reticence of most genteel women to identify themselves in public as literary, artistic or musical creators) capable of standing equally for “Mr.,” “Mrs.,” “Miss” and “Master”. A second edition of the same publication sold by Walsh at an undetermined later date omits the three English songs (hardly enough to constitute the “Collection” promised by the original title page) and blanks out everything on that page between “CANZONETS.” and “London.”, leaving an unsightly gap.<sup>82</sup> Was Walsh’s suppression of “A. H.” a deliberate act, perhaps because he no longer believed the attribution to be correct, or was it an accidental by-product of the preceding deletion? Or could it even be that he thought it expedient to get rid of the “H” (a letter rarely used in Italian) so that, by default, purchasers would now imagine that the canzonettas were the work of one or more Italian hands?

At this point, it is prudent not to get too excited, but to continue the investigation on the provisional assumption that Henry was the actual composer of everything in the collection. First, it will be useful to have a table of contents for reference (Table 3).

The eighteenth-century canzonetta, anglicized as “canzonet”, was, as its name suggests, a short, single-movement song. It was either monostrophic or polystrophic and generally of a light, cheerful and amorous character. Most settings were for a single high voice with continuo accompaniment, but canzonets for two or three voices, ordinarily treated in a homophonic manner, were also popular. The genre took wing in England in the second third of the century just as the popularity of the cantata, Italian and native alike, was beginning to wane. The earliest collection of canzonetta settings published there was the first volume (of two) by the Dutch violinist and composer Willem de Fesch, then resident in London.<sup>83</sup> These *Canzonette ed arie*, published in 1735 or slightly earlier, took most of their texts from the widely circulated canzonettas by the London-based poet Paolo Rolli published in 1727.<sup>84</sup> They paved the way for the numerous collections of Venetian ballads (or gondola songs), which were an important sub-species of canzonetta. Walsh’s first, and extremely popular, collection of these ballads by J. A. Hasse and others, which came out in 1742, was the opening landmark.<sup>85</sup> The next major event was a fine collection of canzonets on English texts for two and three voices by the Pepusch pupil John Travers that appeared in 1746.<sup>86</sup> The new Holcombe collection (ignoring the three

<sup>82</sup> Example in London, British Library, E. 270.y.(6). See Smith and Humphries, *Bibliography*, 194 (no. 862) and 350 (no. 861a). In this second edition the sequence of the canzonets is slightly amended.

<sup>83</sup> De Fesch, *Canzonette ed arie*. The earliest known advertisement for this collection, placed in the *Leidsche Courant*, 22 July 1735 by the Dutch music seller Jacobus Lovering, describes it as “niewewelings uyt London omfangen” (newly received from London). My thanks to Rudolf Rasch for information on this advertisement.

<sup>84</sup> Rolli, *Di canzonette e di cantate*. On this collection and Rolli’s cantatas and canzonets generally, see Hicks, “Paolo Rolli’s Canzonets”.

<sup>85</sup> *Venetian Ballad’s*; Smith and Humphries, *Bibliography*, 186 (no. 826).

<sup>86</sup> Travers, *Eighteen Canzonets*.

**Table 3**

The content of Henry (and/or Anne?) Holcombe, *Twelve Italian Canzonets to Which is Added a Collection of English Songs* (1753).

No.	Incipit	Poet	Selected earlier concordances
1	Pastorella, io giurerei	Pietro Metastasio	<i>Zenobia</i>
2	Arde ( <i>recte</i> , Ardi) per me fedele	Pietro Metastasio	<i>Didone abbandonata</i> (London, 1748)
3	Accorrete, voi pastori	Giacomo Rossi	<i>Il pastor fido</i> (London, 1734)
4	S'io bramo mio tesoro	? / P. Metastasio	? / <i>La clemenza di Tito</i> (London, 1737)
5	Quanto mai felici siete	Pietro Metastasio	<i>Il pastor fido</i> (London, 1734)
6	Sentirsi il petto accendere	Francesco Silvani	Taken from a London pasticcio?
7	Il piacer, la gioia scenda	Pietro Metastasio	<i>Semiramide riconosciuta</i> (London, 1733)
8	Bella, consola intanto	Apostolo Zeno	<i>Scipione</i> (London, 1726)
9	All'ombre, alle catene	G. P. Candi	<i>L'Idaspe fedele</i> (London, 1710)
10	Se mi rivolgo al prato	Grazio Braccioli	<i>Orlando</i> (London, 1733)
11	Son regina e sono amante	Pietro Metastasio	<i>Didone abbandonata</i> (London, 1748)
12	Te felice, o pastorella	G. C. Pasquini	<i>Leucippo</i>
13	Too late for redress and too soon for my ease	Unknown	/
14	Long from the force of Beauty's charms	Unknown	<i>The Musical Miscellany</i> 5 (1731), 57
15	It is not that I love you less	Edmund Waller	<i>The Self Banished</i> (stanzas 1 and 2 only)

English songs tacked on at the end) introduced yet another variety: a canzonet for solo voice set to Italian words but with a typically English – indeed, shockingly un-Italian – freedom in the treatment of the text.

As Table 3 shows, the texts of the twelve Italian canzonets are all taken from aria texts, many by Metastasio and most, if not all, to be found in original or “imported” arias used in Italian operas performed in London between 1710 (the year of Francesco Mancini’s *Idaspe fedele*) and the late 1740s. The most likely source for them was published libretti or collections of operatic “Songs”, although one or two could have been transcribed from musical manuscripts in circulation. Only a single canzonet, no. 11, retains the original *da capo* (ABA) structure. The rest either: (i) adopt the more concise AB structure, assigning the two poetic semistrophes to the two repeated sections in binary form (nos. 4, 5); (ii) use only the A text, repeating it in the second section (nos. 1, 2, 3, 8, 10, 12); (iii) divide the A text into two, assigning each half to one repeated section (no. 7); or (iv) use only the A text within a unitary (through-composed) structure (nos. 6, 9). No. 4 complicates the picture by taking its A text from an aria in A major (a single quatrain imported from an unknown

source into the 1736 revival of Handel's *Ariodante*) and its B text from a different aria in A minor, "Ch'io parto reo, lo vedi", performed at the King's Theatre in 1737 in a setting by Francesco Veracini. The dismemberment does not end there: no. 10 uses only the first three (out of four) lines of its borrowed semistrophe. The repurposed Italian aria texts in Holcombe's canzonets make an interesting parallel with those utilized as chamber duet texts around the same time by Maurice Greene.<sup>87</sup> In both cases, the repurposing probably arose from simple expediency: the absence of convenient alternative sources of settable text coupled with a willingness, born of the English tradition of song-writing, to pay little regard to genre boundaries.

Given Henry Holcombe's love, and presumably also command, of the Italian language and his frequent visits to the opera-house, one can easily believe that the purloined texts were findable at his home in his personal library. He may have been inspired to branch out into the setting of Italian texts by a song collection privately published in 1748 to which he had subscribed: Elisabetta de Gambarini's *Lessons for the Harpsichord Intermix'd with Italian and English Songs*, Op. 2.<sup>88</sup> This heterogeneous collection includes among its Italian songs two items headed *Canzonetta*, which are both short and in binary form. Their texts, however, are decidedly non-operatic and could well have been custom-written by Gambarini herself. Henry very possibly purchased this collection primarily for the use of his daughter Anne (it is a female-oriented product *par excellence*), but he must also have taken some note of its contents.

In the *Twelve Italian Canzonets* there are countless mistakes in the rendering of the Italian – in contrast to the English – texts: incorrect letters, missing apostrophes, syllables allocated to the wrong word and similar. The most likely explanation is carelessness on the engraver's part or insufficient legibility of the manuscript from which he copied – one could not expect him, after all, miraculously to acquire an understanding of the Italian language in order to decide between a sloppily written "a" and an "o". Why proof-reading did not lead to correction of most of the mistakes is another matter – but one too endemic in eighteenth-century publications of music generally to need discussion here.<sup>89</sup>

The musical quality of this collection is very impressive. So, too, is its markedly Italianate quality. There is an elegant, carefree naturalness and lucidity about the writing, which, though deploying the full panoply of *galant* devices and clichés, manages to avoid the studied rhythmic complexity often found in English vocal lines. Take, for example, the opening of "Pastorella, io giurerei", shown as Music example 6, with its catchy introductory "symphony".

Interestingly, this canzonet was one of two (the other was no. 4) copied out between 1754 and 1760 into a manuscript album of keyboard and vocal music (shelfmark CWJHA/19/1, catalogue reference Jenkyns 01) that passed into the possession of the novelist Jane Austen's family and is today privately owned by Richard Jenkyns, by agreement with whom the

<sup>87</sup> Talbot, "Maurice Greene's Vocal Chamber Music", 120–121.

<sup>88</sup> Listed in Simon D. I. Fleming and Martin Perkins, *Dataset of Subscribers to Eighteenth-Century Music Publications in Britain and Ireland*, <https://musicsubscribers.co.uk>.

<sup>89</sup> Walsh's collections of *Venetian Ballad's* often mangle the Italian words almost as badly.



### Music example 6

Henry Holcombe, opening of the canzonet “Pastorella, io giurerei”, no. 1 in *Twelve Italian Canzonets to Which is Added a Collection of English Songs* (1753).

Andante

Pa - sto - rel - la, io giu - re - re - i O che av-  
-vam - pi o man - ca po - co; Hai ne - gli oc - chi un cer - to fo - co  
Che non spe - ri cru - del - tà, [hpd]

University of Southampton has catalogued and digitized it together with the other volumes making up the Austen family’s collection of music.<sup>90</sup>

Little needs saying about the three English songs bringing up the rear of the volume except that they are good, typical specimens of their type. No. 14 is noteworthy for taking its text from a song set by an unknown composer in the fifth volume of *The Musical Miscellany*, bringing us back to Henry’s library. Perhaps significantly, the text of no. 15

<sup>90</sup> Accessible at <https://archive.org/details/austen1676469-2001/page/n33/mode/2up>.

had been set by Robert Cox during Henry's period at Drury Lane, from which he perhaps remembered it.

So where does this leave Anne's tenuous claim to authorship? The circumstantial evidence of many different kinds is so overwhelming that even if there had been no "M. Holcombe" or "A. H." to supply preliminary cues, close scrutiny of the music itself, and especially of the English songs, would have pointed unambiguously towards her father. And yet, the most worrying point causing doubt over Henry's authorship has not been made earlier: why should a well-known and respected musician never previously known for withholding his name suddenly hide his light under a bushel and prejudice sales by reducing that name to enigmatic initials – moreover, inaccurate ones?

My belief is that the answer must in some way involve Anne. We learned that between his second marriage in 1752 and the writing of his will in 1754 Henry took the step of securing before his death the futures of the adult children by his first marriage, Anne and James. Of the two siblings, Anne, being an unmarried woman, was the more economically vulnerable, and if there was a realistic chance of her inheriting part of Henry's mantle as a musician – say, by practising as a private music teacher – she would surely have grasped it. What if the combination of "Holcombe" in the newspaper advertisement and "A." on the title page were a two-pronged ruse thought up by Henry for the purpose of allowing Anne plausibly to claim authorship after his death and thereby earn a little credit for herself? If this hypothesis is correct, we do not need to search for any signs of her participation in the planning and execution of the collection. Moreover, this interpretation would allow us to speculate, first, on whether Walsh's not easily explainable action in expunging the initials in his abbreviated second edition of the collection was a deed expressing knowledge and disapproval of the ruse, and, second, on whether Henry's unexpected reversion to private publication for his final song collection was intended as a sharp riposte to a uncooperative publisher.

### **The Song Collection *The Musical Medley* (1755)**

If the *Twelve Italian Canzonets* were only covertly valedictory, *The Musical Medley*, longest of Holcombe's song collections, is almost explicitly so, rounding off slightly untidily (given the more than usually heterogeneous character of the songs) but undeniably impressively his musical legacy. Table 4 summarizes its content. Tellingly, it contains only one song, no. 8, with an amorous-cum-pastoral subject. All the rest are in some way moralistic or meditative, expressing awe before Nature or the Divinity (nos. 1, 10, 11, 15, 16, 17, 18)<sup>91</sup> and sorrow over the human condition (nos. 3, 4, 6, 13, 19), or else offering sage advice to those at risk of straying from the path of righteousness (nos. 2, 5, 7, 9, 12, 14). The titles, probably all originating from Holcombe himself, signpost each song's content with great precision.

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<sup>91</sup> Nos. 1 and 10 are actual hymns, which in simpler settings have remained in the Anglican repertoire.

**Table 4**

The Content of Henry Holcombe's Song Collection *The Musical Medley* (1755).

No.	Incipit	Title	Poet	Selected earlier concordances
1	How brisk the breath of morning blows	<i>A Thought on a Spring Morning</i>	Charles Wesley	Hymn, unpublished at the time, written c. 1751
2	The world, my dear Myra, is full of deceit	<i>On Friendship to a Lady</i>	Unknown	/
3	Tell me, perjur'd Damon, why	<i>The Disconsolate Maid</i>	Unknown	/
4	Love, hope and joy	<i>A Couplet by Mr Pope</i>	Alexander Pope	<i>An Essay on Man</i> (c. 1733), lines 107–108
5	Thy vain pursuit, fond youth, give o'er	<i>The Honest Confession</i>	Unknown	Setting by Mr. Gouge in <i>The Musical Miscellany</i> 1 (1729), 83
6	Sad solitary mole, whose stream	<i>Extempore Verses on the Death of a Friend</i>	Unknown	/
7	Ye belles and ye flirts and ye pert little things	<i>Advice to the Fair Sex</i>	Wm. Whitehead	R. Dodsley, <i>A Collection of Poems</i> (1755), 4:176–177
8	Behold, my fair, what joyous scenes	<i>An Enconium on the Month of May</i>	Unknown	/
9	The beau with his delicate, womanish face	<i>The Maid's Choice of Husband</i>	Unknown	Words in <i>The London Magazine</i> (1751), 490
10	O happy soul that soars on high	<i>The Words by D.' Watts</i>	Isaac Watts	Hymn, unpublished at the time
11	Hail, charming grotto, still retreat	<i>A Thought in a Grotto</i>	Unknown	/
12	Ye fair that would be blest in love	<i>A Friendly Hint to the Ladies</i>	John Hughes?	Samuel Richardson, in <i>The History of Sir Charles Grandison</i> (1754), 1:148
13	When tides of youthful blood run high	<i>A Serious Thought on Death</i>	Joseph Addison	<i>Rosamond</i> (1707)
14	Ye happy swains whose hearts are free	<i>The Caution</i>	Sir George Etheridge	Published in John Dryden's <i>Sylvae</i> , 3rd edition (1702), 187

**Table 4**  
(continued)

No.	Incipit	Title	Poet	Selected earlier concordances
16	Blest solitude, devotion's greatest friend	<i>A Panegyric on Solitude</i>	Unknown	/
17	Ye woods and ye mountains unknown	/	William Shenstone	/
18	Evington, charming seat of love	<i>Verses on a Gentleman's Seat in Kent</i>	Unknown	/
19	Cruel remembrance, home-bred foe	<i>The Injur'd Lover</i>	Unknown	/

About half of the authors of the poems are untraced. In his effort to turn his collection into a true swan song it seems that Holcombe turned to many manuscript, or at least obscure, literary sources. As in earlier collections, he trawled to some extent in his own past, as the text taken from *Rosamond* demonstrates, although the Whitehead text (no. 7), in sharp contrast, appears to have been brand new.

The average dimensions of the songs are noticeably raised by comparison with his earlier collections, although this is partly due to the higher incidence of multi-sectional (i.e. beyond simple binary) or multi-movement structures. There is a corresponding diversification in the compositional approaches adopted.

More neatly engraved than any of Holcombe's earlier collections, *The Musical Medley* has a brutally curt title page reading: "The | MUSICAL MEDLEY | or | A Collection of English | Songs and Cantatas | Set to Musick by | HENRY HOLCOMBE". The complete absence of information about publisher, point of sale and price might initially suggest that this was not only a private publication but also one where the volume was distributed informally, possibly even sometimes donated, to a few chosen recipients. But in fact the volume was advertised in the normal manner, albeit apparently only once: in the *Public Advertiser* of 29 November 1755. The advertisement reads: "just published, | A Collection of new ENGLISH SONGS | called the MUSICAL MEDLEY. Set to Musick by Henry | Holcombe, and sold at his Lodgings, at Mr. Howell's, in Great | Rider-street, St. James's, Price Five Shillings, to the Masters | four Shillings". The fact that Henry was now living no longer at "his House" but at "his Lodgings" suggests either that he had fallen on hard times since writing his will or that ill health and perhaps restricted mobility had forced him to change his accommodation. The lack of any separate mention of a house among the property bequeathed to his wife Elizabeth, residuary beneficiary of his will, could mean that that the problems had started even earlier. It is interesting to see him once again setting two different price levels: the "Masters", presumably meaning professional musicians, pay only four shillings; everyone else, five.

Structurally speaking, the new songs conform to type in making binary form (or a

**Music example 7**

Henry Holcombe, bars 9–18 of the song “O Happy Soul That Soars on High”, no. 10 in *The Musical Medley* (1755).

(Andante affettuoso)

Violin

Voice

Continuo

O hap - py soul that soars on high, o hap - py soul that

soars on high, o hap - py, o hap - py, o

hap - py soul that soars on high, While men lie gro - vel - ing here,

unitary form differing from it only by the absence of repeats) the default choice. But now, the provision of “symphonies” is mandatory rather than merely optional. Moreover, these ritornellos, especially the opening ones, are sometimes of such length and complexity as to remind one of nineteenth-century art song. Nearly always, they comprise a melody on the upper staff (temporarily taken over from the voice) as well as a figured bass. Many of them look particularly well suited to performance with a violin on the upper line, even though a harpsichordist can easily negotiate them.

There are two songs, nos. 8 and 16, that, although they are not so labelled, Paul Francis Rice rightly includes in his catalogue of eighteenth-century British cantatas.<sup>92</sup> The

<sup>92</sup> Rice, *Solo Cantata*, 256–259. Although the space for value judgment in this catalogue is very limited, Rice aptly describes the melodies of the two cantatas in *The Garland* as “energetic and tuneful”, stating that his style “would have appealed to the home/amateur market of the day”.

*Enconium on the Month of May* (no. 8), with its RA structure, belongs to the less common two-movement type that the Italians called *cantata semplice*. Its aria is in binary form, moving to a new metre and tempo for the second section in order, perhaps, to simulate the effect of having three movements rather than only two.

More ambitious is the *Panegyric on Solitude* (no. 16), whose six movements are laid out as RARARA. Its tonal design is very enterprising. The six movements follow the trajectory C minor | E flat major | C minor → G minor | G major | D major → E minor | C major. The shift from the predominance of minor to that of major tonality mirrors the progressive brightening of the mood of the words. Holcombe differentiates the form of the arias skilfully: the first is unitary; the second with *da capo*; the third binary.<sup>93</sup>

The most impressive song in the collection, however, is no. 10: “O Happy Soul That Soars on High”. Only here does the upper instrumental line, which this time must certainly have been conceived for violin, continue to partner and dialogue continuously with the voice during the vocal sections, forcing Holcombe to notate on three rather than two staves. The delightfulness of the three-part counterpoint for the obbligato parts that this brings about – found nowhere else in Holcombe’s known *oeuvre* – makes one regret that there are no trio sonatas or chamber duets from his pen. Music example 7 provides a specimen of this texture, making a suitable conclusion to the discussion of his works.

### What Now for Holcombe?

This article did not start with the review of existing literature on its subject that custom prefers, simply because there is so little of it. Prior to the short paragraphs written by Burney and Hawkins one finds hardly any commentary on Holcombe’s life and works. Even after them, remarkably little has been added to the record apart from the slow trickle of small supplementary facts cumulatively added by lexicographers and the authors of entries in encyclopaedias, catalogues and reference works. The opportunity was missed by William S. Newman to write anything at all about the sonatas and by Richard Goodall to make more than the briefest passing reference to the cantatas and songs in his study of the eighteenth-century English cantata.<sup>94</sup> Silent, too, is the volume devoted to the eighteenth century in *The Blackwell History of Music in Britain*.<sup>95</sup> That is all now water under the bridge. My hope is that the present article will have convinced readers that Holcombe is a composer worth studying further, performing, recording and getting into print in reliable, affordable editions.

<sup>93</sup> Holcombe’s treatment of *da capo* form, also seen in the canzonets, differs from the Italian prototype by giving the B sections a closed rather than open tonal structure, with the result that they come to resemble the trio in a tripartite minuet-and-trio structure. This is likewise true of the central section of *A Thought on a Spring Morning* (no. 1), the only other item in *The Musical Medley* to employ that form.

<sup>94</sup> Newman, *Sonata in the Baroque Era*; Goodall, *Eighteenth-Century English Secular Cantatas*.

<sup>95</sup> Johnstone and Fiske, *Music in Britain*.

Where to start with publication? The situation is made more favourable by the fact that all Holcombe's music except the last-mentioned song is notated on two-stave systems and is as easily performable today in a domestic setting (echoing his own day) as in the concert hall. Production costs should be low, and the potential market reasonably large.

An obvious priority must be the six violin sonatas, which I find as well written and interesting as any produced by an English-born composer (therefore leaving aside Pepusch, Handel and Carbonelli) during the first half of the eighteenth century.<sup>96</sup> The three flute sonatas – perhaps less well suited to concert use but excellent for teaching or recreation – are also very publishable.<sup>97</sup> As for the keyboard sonata, a singleton, it could find a good home in a published or recorded anthology.

The vocal music is not quite so simple either to publish or to perform. A majority of the songs are polystrophic, and some have (for modern tastes) a ridiculously high number of stanzas, of which the texts for only two or three can be stacked as underlay beneath the singer's staff. This is of little importance to scholars, who can simply read separately the remaining stanzas printed after the score, but for singers this is very inconvenient, particularly when those stanzas form a recognizable narrative that makes cutting undesirable.

But polystrophic songs are probably not the top priority anyway, since their musical component tends to be shorter and less ambitiously developed than one finds in their counterparts with only one to three stanzas. My own preference would be, in descending order, for modern editions of the twelve Italian canzonets (which have the added attraction of being pioneering works within their English context) and the four cantatas. The remaining forty-odd songs would, initially at least, be best served by anthologies using as criteria for inclusion musical quality, the degree of difficulty, the vocal compass and the interest of the literary text. During the thirty-five or more years of his activity as a composer of songs, Holcombe's style underwent considerable evolution, and these anthologies could be made more attractive if they included songs from several different phases of his life.

There are also some loose threads in Holcombe's biography that require tying up. The background to his removal to London is still hazy. We also need a fuller and clearer picture of his ability as a singer, both before and after his voice broke. His obvious closeness to Galliard, who, according to Samuel Richardson (see Table 4, no. 12), was the composer of an earlier setting of the poem "Ye Fair Who Would Be Blest in Love" inserted into his last novel, deserves further investigation, as does his link to Carbonelli. Further occasions when Holcombe performed outside London, particularly in the interval between his work at Drury Lane and his settling down as a teacher in London, will probably come to light. We still know very little about his long activity as a music teacher, something on which references in private correspondence or entries in account books might provide information. And, most of all, the mysterious circumstances surrounding the *Twelve Italian Canzonets* invite a better explanation than I have been able to provide.

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<sup>96</sup> At the time of writing, I am working on such an edition.

<sup>97</sup> Jeremy Barlow in fact broke the ice in 1977 by publishing with Schott the three airs making up a chamber sonata in E minor (but not the six in other keys).

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## PEVEC IN SKLADATELJ HENRY HOLCOMBE (1690–1756)

### Povzetek

Henry Holcombe, sin čipkarskega mojstra iz grofije Dorset na jugozahodu Anglije, se je rodil leta 1690 v Chestru na severozahodu Anglije. Leta 1698 se je kot pevec pridružil zboru chestrske stolnice, kjer je pel do leta 1704. Nato se je preselil v London, kjer je približno dve leti pel deški sopran v skupini glasbenikov gledališča Drury Lane. Sprva je bil znan le kot »Deček« (»The Boy«), ki je pel zahtevne vloge vokalne glasbe vseh zvrsti, med drugim v operah *Camilla* in *Rosamond*, ter vzljubil opero in italijanščino. Po mutaciji leta 1707 je postal samostojni tenorist in v Londonu med prvimi v javnosti pel kantate, tudi italijanske. Nastopal je tudi v drugih mestih (York, Nottingham, Bath).

V drugem desetletju 18. stoletja se je podal v vode zasebnega glasbenega poučevanja (petje in čembalo), kar mu je prineslo veliko bogastvo in dostop do višjih družbenih slojev, med bankirje in direktorje. Njegov novi položaj ga je nekoliko oddaljil od skupnosti londonskih poklicnih glasbenikov, čeprav je postal član Akademije za staro glasbo (Academy of Ancient Music) in pozneje še Kraljevega združenja glasbenikov (Royal Society of Musicians). Njegova prva žena Martha je bila prezbiterijanka in pod njenim vplivom so ga čedalje bolj privlačila resna, pogosto verska besedila.

V letih med okoli 1720 in 1745 je dozorel kot skladatelj in napisal več zelo uspešnih skladb za solistični glas in continuo. Med letoma 1745 in 1755 je izdajal svojo zapuščino, štiri obsežne zbirke: v prvi so bile predvsem violinske sonate, v naslednjih dveh angleške pesmi in kantate, v zadnji italijanske kanconete, ki so njegove najizvirnejše skladbe. Umrli je leta 1756, pokopali pa so ga v Bathu, kjer je bil najbrž v zdravilišču (Bath je bil najbolj priljubljeno angleško letovišče).

Glasba Henryja Holcomba je bila dosledno vrhunska in samosvoja, zato preseneča, da se doslej še nihče ni poglobil vanjo in da obstaja le malo njenih sodobnih izdaj. Namen članka je zapolniti vsaj prvo vrzel v raziskovanju ustvarjanja tega angleškega skladatelja.