The Musical Theatre of Charles Dibdin

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"Why Charles Dibdin?"

An Introduction

In the early 1970s when summer stock brought film and television personalities to the hinterlands, I was on tour with Theo Bikel in a production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, the long-running Broadway musical by Joseph Stein, Jerry Bock, and Sheldon Harnick. Theo, of course, played Tevye; I was in the pit, playing the piano for rehearsals and the accordion for performances. One evening in Springfield, Massachusetts, the performance was accompanied by an electrical storm that aggressively pelted the canvas tent that covered the theatre-in-the-round arena where we were playing. Against the deafening attack of rain on the roof and droplets seeping onto the stage, on and around the dancers trying not to slide their way through Jerome Robbins's complex choreography, the production limped along until, mercifully, the power went out and the theatre went dark. Emergency lights flashed on, and spectators shifted uneasily in their seats awaiting instructions regarding exit strategies and refund policies. Instead of the expected representative from management reciting the rote apology designed for such situations, Bikel, still in costume, appeared on stage carrying a guitar. He announced that the performance could not continue, and the audience was free to leave with their tickets fully refunded; but, if anyone wanted to stay, he would give a solo performance of the rest of the show accompanied only by his guitar. Theo's reputation as a storyteller and folksinger was legendary and his half-hour impromptu concert was a magical, one-of-a-kind experience to which the audience responded with a generous standing ovation. The following day, we learned that there were very few requests for refunds.

Not long after that tour, I returned to college as a student of British musical theatre in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In the midst of my research, I ran across an article in *The Morning Chronicle*, a London daily newspaper dated 19 September 1808 that introduced me to a solo performer named Charles Dibdin who appeared to have an experience similar to that of *Fiddler on the Roof*:

> Sans Pareil. On Saturday evening Mr. Dibdin opened this charming little Theatre with an intention to perform his new Entertainment; but was prevented by the absence of one of his principal performers, which we understand was occasioned by a family calamity. Mr. Dibdin, who has always piqued himself on his punctuality, came on the stage at a quarter past eight and begged the patience of the audience who, indeed, were so patient, that they waited half an hour longer without the smallest murmuring. Out of justice, Mr. Dibdin came on again, and said that the only remedy he could suggest would be for them to receive their money again; for it would be an injury to his reputation to perform the piece in parcels; and, after all, afford them but little pleasure; but that, in return for their indulgent patience, he would give them a specimen of the songs . . . and then the money should be returned. The playfulness and neatness of this trifle had such an electric effect, that there was a universal reiteration of NO MONEY. They were then entreated to take their checks, which so satisfied the whole audience, that only four shillings were returned, and many took neither check nor money, but said they were perfectly satisfied with what they had heard and would frequently come again. So much were the public pleased to hail their old favourite, who looked as well as spoke, and sung with as much spirit as ever, that their conduct was handsome and delicate towards him in the extreme. Not a single hiss was heard during the whole time.

Even though the circumstances were not identical, my recent experience with Bikel's elegant management skills enabled me to have a visceral appreciation of what Dibdin had been able to do. I knew what it felt like to be in the presence of a charismatic entertainer in my own century—I had worked with many legends of the American stage—but this was the first time I felt instinctively close to a performer in a previous century. I had read memoirs and biographies of great actors and musicians since I was a child, but it was the thunderstorm during the *Fiddler* tour that enabled me to embrace the experience of another time, to feel what it was like in a more than intellectual manner.

The more I learned about Dibdin, the more engaged I became. Because Dibdin wrote extensively about his life and his musical-theatrical philosophies we have access to first-hand accounts of his life,[1] though only

[1] For example, *The Royal Circus Epitomized* (1784); *The Musical Tour of Mr. Dibdin* (1788); *A Complete History of the English Stage* (1800); *The Professional Life of Mr. Dibdin, Written by Himself. Together with the Words of Six Hundred Songs Selected from His Works* (1803); *The Public Undeceived* (1807). In addition, Dibdin expressed his artistic philosophy in his various periodical publications, *The Devil* (1787), *The Bystander, or, Universal Weekly Expositor* (1790), *How Do You Do?* (1796).

rarely does he provide an insight into his creative process. We know that he was the youngest of eighteen children born to a silversmith and his wife, baptized in March 1745 at Holy Rood Church in Southampton, and intended for the clergy, to which end, Dibdin was sent at an early age to Winchester Cathedral where he excelled as a choirboy. So successful were his musical exploits that young Dibdin decided to exchange a clerical career for that of a church organist, applying for a position as church organist in Hampshire in 1759 but rejected because of his age. His older brother, Thomas, a captain of a West Indiaman, subsequently persuaded Dibdin to move to London where he served an apprenticeship with the music publisher John Johnson before an association with tenor John Beard, son-in-law of John Rich, the proprietor of Theatre Royal, Covent Garden, resulted in a contract with that establishment at the beginning of the 1760–1761 season.[2] Employment followed at the new Theatre on Richmond, Ranelagh Gardens, Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, Marylebone Gardens, Sadler's Wells, the Royal Circus, as well as the more intimate Sans Souci and Sans Pareil rooms for his private entertainments while Dibdin quickly established himself in and around London as a popular and prolific actor-singer, composer-librettist, novelist, essayist, theorist, historian, and theatre manager, who was eager to please but difficult to work with.

Having served as composer and musical director for a great many regional repertory theatres, I was initially intrigued by the similarities in Dibdin's and my professional careers and could readily appreciate his concerns about theatre managers and recalcitrant musicians. However, as I became more familiar with his theatre work, I became fascinated by how comfortably it resonated with British and American musical theatre of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. His use of melody, for example, unfettered by complicated structural and harmonic devices, which rendered him the chief exponent in Britain of the galant style in the eighteenth century was similar to (and, perhaps, even the stylistic antecedent of) the music developed for Edwardes's Gaiety Theatre musicals, Charles Hoyt's *A Trip to Chinatown*, and David Braham's compositions for Harrigan and Hart, all of which had a profound influence on the popular musical theatre in the twentieth century, and anticipated composers such as Lionel Bart, Paul Rubens, Noel Coward, Jerry Herman, and (surprisingly) Galt MacDermot. Much of Dibdin's galant theatre compositions is echoed in the works of these composers whether it be in the simplicity of harmonic

[2] See *The Professional Life* 1: 13–30; Fahrner (1989),6–9; *The Musical Times* 27, no.516 (February 1866): 68–72; *Tinsley's Magazine* 13 (December 1873): 538–548; *The European Magazine* (November 1784): 359–360.

structure rooted in tonic, dominant, and subdominant; or in the flowing lyricism of the melodic line; or in the sometimes awkward or unusual construction that is musically surprising and dramatically effective. Interestingly, like Dibdin, MacDermot typically arranged and orchestrated his scores. Dibdin was acutely aware of the dramatic potential of consonance, dissonance, and rhythmic variation in his compositions, and he enlarged the palette of British theatrical music in the eighteenth century in the same way that Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim enlivened (some might say “exploded”) the theatrical musical palette of the twentieth century.

Dibdin’s use contemporary events, manners, and fads as the subject of his songs invites similarities with the “topical song” craze in early twentieth century musical entertainments and rendered him an early purveyor of the musical revue before the term "revue" had been employed as a theatre genre. His management of popular musical idioms (often juxtaposed with serious musical forms) appeared to anticipate Andrew Lloyd Webber in the development of the rock musical and Stephen Sondheim in the creation of his own indigenous sound; and his solo performances were among the earliest examples of the musical one-man show, anticipating solo performances in the Musical Hall and Vaudeville. Moreover, Dibdin was acknowledged as the first to develop in the English musical theatre the device of the “Italianate Finale” in which the dramatic action is carried forward through a variety of musical sections employing different meters and melodies. This musical structure would become standard in English operetta in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and will even be found in the “Finalettos” of musical comedies such as *Lady, Be Good* and *No, No, Nanette*, and *Anyone Can Whistle*. A familiar example of this musical theatre form would be Stephen Sondheim’s “A Weekend in the Country” from *A Little Night Music*.

Dibdin’s innovations were not limited to musical theatre productions. An expert keyboardist, Dibdin broke with tradition by being the first to perform publicly in England on a fortepiano (as opposed to harpsichord) when he accompanied Miss Brickler at her benefit concert at Covent Garden on 16 May 1767. More importantly, perhaps, he was an outspoken advocate for the rights of the theatre composer who, in the late eighteenth century, was accorded secondary status to the librettist in both financial recompense and authorial credit. By demanding collaboration and reimbursement on an equal footing with that of the playwright, by opposing the pastiche tradition in favor of the single composer in English musicals, and by writing his own libretti to control the royalties of his songs and musicals, Dibdin was

instrumental in the elevation of the musician as the primary artist in the British musical theatre.[3]

Like Andrew Lloyd-Webber, Dibdin was a recognized brand, popular with audiences but not always loved by the critics who often attacked him because he lacked a formal musical education, and rare was the review that praised his words as well as his music. Critics, however, never complained of his characterizations of ethnic minorities which, admittedly, were caricatures that might be considered offensive today. Dibdin's portrayals of Africans, Jews, Italians, Germans, and Irish traded on stereotypical mannerisms, vocalizations, vocabularies, and physical characteristics that his enlightened audience understood and accepted as representative of "other" in society. Because he firmly believed that the theatre is "a school of morality" (*Complete History of the English Stage* 5:375), Dibdin, the librettist rarely strayed from the established Enlightenment values of his day.

Charles Dibdin's creative output (especially his oeuvre lionizing the British navy and the underrepresented social/ethnic strata of English society) was celebrated during his lifetime and has been the subject of memoirs, a biography, and numerous collections of songs,[4] and many of

[3] Roger Fiske (1973) writes that "We shall see Dibdin turning from an unknown composer forced to accept the pastiche convention into a known composer who would have nothing to do with it. Bickerstaff aided and abetted Dibdin because he realized that good opera could be achieved only if the composer and the librettist collaborated on terms of equality" (265).

[4] See William Kitchiner, M.D. *The Sea Songs of Charles Dibdin" with a Memoir of his Life and Writings* (1823); *A Selection of Dibdin's Songs*, arranged by John Davy, George W. Maddison, and H. Burrows (1824); *The Songs of Charles Dibdin* (1839); Thomas Dibdin's *Songs, Naval and National, of the late Charles Dibdin; with a Memoir* (1841); G.H. Davidson's *The Songs of Charles Dibdin, Chronologically Arranged: With Notes, Historical, Biographical, and Critical.* To which is prefixed a Memoir of the Author by George Hogarth (1842); *The Songs of C. Dibdin* (1863); *Sea Songs and Ballads by Charles Dibdin* (1877); William Alexander Barrett (ed.) *Twenty-One Songs Composed by Charles Dibdin* 1745–1814 (1890); *The Royal Naval Exhibition Edition. Charles Dibdin's Songs* (1891); Edward R. Dibdin's *A Charles Dibdin Bibliography* (1937); Wilfred Partington's *Charles Dibdin: The Man whose Songs helped to Win the Battle of Trafalgar and who did not allow the Nation to forget it, either* (1944); Robert Fahrner's *The Theatre Career of Charles Dibdin the Elder (1745–1814)* (1989); Eric Walter White's *A History of English Opera* (1983); Peter Holman (ed.) *Charles Dibdin: The Sadler's Wells Dialogues* (2007); and Oskar Cox Jensen (ed.) *Charles Dibdin and Late Georgian Culture* (2018). See also *The Musical Review* (November 1784); *Musical Opinion* (January 1945).

Charles Dibdin's musical theatre compositions were critically surveyed in Roger Fiske's monumental *English Theatre Music in the Eighteenth Century* (1973). No book, however, appeared to exist dealing specifically with an analysis of Dibdin's compositional style or the dramatic nature of his orchestrations. Writing in *The Oxford History of English Music*, John Caldwell suggests that Dibdin's technique of composition was in some ways rather rough and ready, but there is a theatrical appositeness about his music that often compensates for the simplicity of his procedures. Very little survives orchestrally, but what there is shows a competent hand" (99–100). Both of Caldwell's assertions are misleading since, contrary to popular belief (and even Dibdin's insistence) that he composed spontaneously and never wrote anything down until his music was due to be published, manuscript evidence of melodic sketches and orchestrations of songs that were never performed or published indicate that he was more of a meticulous craftsman than a rough and ready hack. In addition, more than a little of Dibdin's orchestrations are in existence. Eighteen overtures in full score exist in the British Library Music Collections as well as published copies of the overtures to *The Padlock*, *The Institution of the Garter*, *The Blackamoor Wash'd White*, and *The Recruiting Serjeant*, his one-act musical entertainment that was also published in (more or less) full score. Also in existence are manuscript scores of individual numbers from Dibdin's published comic operas and full and partial orchestral scores of several of his unproduced musical comedies.

With such a wealth of information available to scholars and researchers, it surprised me that no book had appeared bringing it to light; so, having been a collector of Dibdin's published and unpublished compositions for nearly fifty years, I offer the reader my attempt to fill such a gap in Dibdin scholarship: *The Musical Theatre of Charles Dibdin,* an investigation into what eighteenth-century critics called "Dibdinish," an arguably innovative musical-theatre idiom created by the intermingling of theatricality and raw talent with musical techniques borrowed from Italian Opera, "galant" theories, and the Ballad Opera tradition. Analyses of Dibdin's compositions explore the melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic structures he derived from his three major influences and examine the ways in which he assimilated them into a dramatic-action-driven, indigenous musical theatre sound.

Because Dibdin's musical theatre compositions were designed for theatrical performance, their effectiveness cannot be determined by musical analysis alone. Speaking of an air Dibdin composed for Isaac Bickerstaff's *Love in the City*, Fiske wrote: "As abstract music that is abysmal, but as a vehicle for an ebullient singing-actress it is superb" (338), noting that Dibdin's music is best studied in the context of its dramatic function.

Discussions of Dibdin's librettos support the musical analysis by focusing on the dramatic situation of a particular song, musical scene, dance, or (in the case of pantomimes) incidental music. An examination of Dibdin's orchestrations plays a central part in this study because they often present a tonal composition very different from the published vocal score, which in most cases is little more than a melody and bass line, designed to be accessible to performers of varying abilities. Probing Dibdin's orchestrations we also learn about the size and make up of English musical theatre orchestras, the colourful and imaginative instrumental effects that were used, and the way in which the orchestra assists the singer and contributes to the dramatic event.

Following a biographical chapter ("It's Just too Dibdinish") that examines Dibdin's theatrical apprenticeship in London, Richmond, and Birmingham (1760–1768) and its long-ranging influence on his career as a composer and librettist, *The Musical Theatre of Charles Dibdin* explores Dibdin's musical and dramatic structures in six units: "Less as a Learned Composer" surveys Dibdin's musical education, his idiosyncratic theories and their relation to eighteenth-century pedagogy and the prevalent musical styles. "Free with Heart and with Voice to Sing" examines Dibdin's approach to vocal music and the influence of Ballad Opera, Italian Opera, and the English theatre on his solo songs, ranging from simple sixteen-measure ballads to technically demanding, dazzling virtuoso arias. "An Action as Daring as Daring Can Be" investigates the various methods through which Dibdin creates musical scenes: recitative (both dry and accompanied), and Italianate finales (borrowed from the comic operas of Baldassare Galuppi). "Sport and Revel without Pause" explores the theatrical functions of Dibdin's musical dialogues (duets and trios) and the choral forms peppered throughout his theatre compositions: catches, glees, vaudevilles, and ensembles. "When the Pigmy Queen Rises" discusses the musical and dramatic structure of Dibdin's incidental music: overtures, pantomime music, dances, and processionals; and "The Tinkling Lyre and Lute, the Minstrel and the Dulcet Flute" examines Dibdin's use of orchestration to support the vocalist, heighten the dramatic situation, and create an atmospheric musical pictorialization of the text.

The final four chapters explore Dibdin's process in fashioning (and re-fashioning) musical theatre based on the demands of the repertory system, the strengths (and obvious limitations) of his actor-singers, and the changing tastes of a British public. "Every Author Has a Right to Imitate Whatever He Is Capable of Improving" investigates the challenges Dibdin faced in altering the music and libretto of an immensely popular three-act French comic opera into a two-act afterpiece designed to appeal to an English

audience. “The Drama’s Laws the Drama’s Patrons Give” explores Dibdin’s practice of revising, reworking, and reusing material in his musical comedies, based on the vicissitudes of theatrical venues and performers. “We That Live to Please Must Please to Live” studies the pasticcios and solo revues created purely as vehicles for Dibdin’s songs, most of which had been popularized by their inclusion in previous shows; and “I’ve Known What ‘Tis to Face the Foe” examines the surviving musical and dramatic sketches of Dibdin’s unproduced musicals with a critical assessment of their merits.

In the preparation of this study, I have been assisted by scholars, musicians, editors, librarians, and their staffs, whose contributions have been invaluable and without which, this work would have been impossible. My heartfelt thanks to Allan Badley of Artaria Editions; Norm Hirschy of Oxford University Press, Brian Moeller at the Huntington Library; Ben Ohmart of BearManor Media; Adam Rummens and Amanda Millar of Cambridge Scholars; Madeleine Scott at Houghton Library, Harvard University; Brian Sherwood at the British Library; Librarians at the Beinecke Library, Yale University, Brooklyn College Library, and Carnegie Library, Pittsburgh; and to David Boynton, who makes everything possible.

2

"It's Just too Dibdinish!"

Dibdin in London

In 1751 Professor William Hayes of Oxford University published a satirical book of musical theory entitled *The Art of Composing Music by a Method entirely New, suited To the meanest Capacity*,[1] in which he wrote with a heavy dose of bravado: "Writers on ancient *Music* tell us, that musical Sounds were not all in which a Performance of *Music* consisted; but that, beside the Musician, there was one who recited, another (with Iron Shoes) who marked the Time or Measure, and a third who gesticulated. Now, if one Man plays, sings, beats Time (although he doth not wear Iron Shoes) and gesticulates, he may fairly be said to outdo the best of them—That Man am I. For what would have employed four different Performers among the Ancients, I do myself. I play, I sing, I beat Time, and am my own Gesticulator; consequently, a greater Man than even *Orpheus* himself, who was at best a Harper" (31–32).

Hayes might very well have anticipated the career of Charles Dibdin the Elder (1745–1814) who burst upon the London stage during the 1760–61 season as a singer at Covent Garden and quickly developed into a popular actor, playwright, composer, theatre manager, novelist, and autobiographer, who composed the music, libretto, and orchestrations for his first musical

[1] Hayes's satirical new method of composing music involved sprinkling tiny drops of ink indiscriminately on ruled manuscript paper. After the paper was saturated sufficiently, the composer was instructed to place treble and bass clefs, as well as time signatures and key signatures, at the beginning of the page and directed to transform the spots into notes of different values and organize the notes into measures. Once this was completed, the composer was permitted to season the score with sharps and flats to taste. The satire was an obvious attack on composer and organist Barnabus Gunn whom Hayes accused of composing music in such a manner. I know not if this early example of aleatoric music was taken seriously or treated as a kind of parlor game like the dice music suggested by Johann Kirnberger's *Der allezeit fertige Polonoisen und Menuetten-componis*t published six years later in 1757. In any case, Hayes was obviously not a fan of Gunn or his music.

theatre piece, *The Shepherd’s Artifice*, at Covent Garden when he was nineteen-years old, and his final comic opera, *The Round Robin*, at the Haymarket, when he was sixty-six. During the forty-seven intervening years, he composed the music and/or libretto for nearly 100 productions, establishing himself as one of the most prolific, innovative, and finest writers of English popular songs,[2] while performing additional roles—pianist, vocal coach, theatre manager, performer—at the theatres royal Drury Lane and Covent Garden, Haymarket, Sadler's Wells, the Royal Circus, Lyceum, and Sans Souci, and moonlighting as a musical theorist, novelist, essayist, travel writer, landscape artist, and theatre historian. Although he found early success in collaborations with playwright Isaac Bickerstaff, actor-manager David Garrick, and actor-pantomimist (and scene painter) James Messink, Dibdin was more temperamentally disposed to working alone, always creating the vocal arrangements and orchestrations of his individual songs and preferring to write his own libretti. He excelled in every musical theatre genre with long-running successes in the 3-act Italianate comic-opera format (*Lionel and Clarissa*), the 2-act Italianate afterpiece (*The Padlock*, *The Wedding Ring*), the 2-act musical comedy (The *Waterman*, *The Quaker*), the Speaking Pantomime (*The Touchstone*), the Burletta (*Poor Vulcan*), the Dramatic Spectacle (*The Jubilee*, *The Institution of the Garter*) the Pantomimic Spectacle-Extravaganza (*Harlequin Freemason*), the Musical Adaptation (*The Deserter*). the Musical Pasticcio (*A Divertisement*), the Musical Play (*The Sultan*), and the One-Man Show (*The Whim of the Moment*).[3]

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[2] Charles Dickens, Junior, writing in *All the Year Round* (3 July 1879) argued that Dibdin “must be considered the best song writer England has produced, and who ranks with [Robert] Burns in Scotland, [Pierre Jean de] Béranger in France, and [Thomas] Moore in Ireland.” In the postscript to his *Songs* (1805), Rev. James Plumtre noted that “if he cannot be called the Father of genuine English Song, [Dibdin] is, at any rate, the Head of Representative of the present family of Song writers. His works circulate through all ranks, from the elegant drawing-room to the humble cottage, and the vessel upon the ocean” (32). In his entry about Dibdin for *The Viking Opera Guide* (1993), Peter Holman added that “at his best, in his early works, [Dibdin] was unsurpassed at setting ordinary speech and down-to-earth situations to vivid music” (264).

[3] *Lionel and Clarissa* played over 100 performances between 1768 and 1798; *The Padlock* was performed over 400 times between 1768 and 1797; *The Waterman*, 180 performances between 1774 and 1798; *The Quaker*, over 200 performances between 1775 and 1798; *The Touchstone*, over 100 performances between 1779 and 1789; *Poor Vulcan* played over 70 nights between 1778 and 1799; *The Jubilee*, 150 between 1769 and 1789; *The Institution of the Garter*, played 48 performances between 1771 and 1773; *Harlequin Freemason*, 65 between 1780 and 1781; *The*

How Dibdin emerged from the chorus to become the Andrew Lloyd Webber of his day is a kind of Cinderella story that parallels Hollywood legends. Born in the bustling port city of Southampton, seventy miles from London, the eighteenth child of Thomas Dibdin, a prosperous silversmith, Charles Dibdin was born on 15 March 1745 and christened two weeks later at Holy Rood Church, popularly known as the "Sailor's Church."[4] As a younger son, Dibdin was earmarked for a career as a clergyman, to which end he was sent to the Pilgrim's School at Winchester Cathedral in 1754 where he was enrolled in the monastic novices' school and was later admitted as a junior chorister.[5] As a choirboy, he showed such promise that he became a principal vocalist in the weekly concerts at Winchester and something of a popular celebrity because of his engaging personality and expressive musical performances. Carried away by his success as a vocalist, Dibdin resolved to make music his profession. As W.A. Barrett suggested in *The Musical Times* (1 February 1886), "He learned to play the harpsicord a little, and applied for the post or organist at North Waltham near Basingstoke, but 'was rejected' as he says, 'on account of his youth.' Those who knew him, however, say that he was scarcely qualified for the post" (68).

Winchester records show that after November 1759, Dibdin was no longer listed among the choirboys at the Cathedral. His much older brother, Thomas, the captain of the *Hope*, an Indian merchantman, had persuaded him to move to London where he promised to provide for him and support his ambitions. Too young and inexperienced to find permanent employment

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Deserter played over 200 performances between 1773 and 1800; *The Sultan*, played 84 times between 1775 and 1800; *The Whim of the Moment*, played over 100 performances between October 1788 and April 1789.

[4] A plaque outside of Holy Rood Church gives Dibdin's date of birth as 15 March 1745, a date reiterated by his biographers, William Kitchiner and George Hogarth in their introductions to his collected songs. Robert Fahrner (1989), however, writes that parish records indicate that Dibdin was "baptized in private March 4th" and "Rec'd in Church 29th" (7). Dibdin's entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography* (1888) suggests that he was born prior to 4 March and that his private baptism on that date was necessitated by life-threatening illness. It is unclear why the baptismal records of Holy Rood Church do not correspond to the date on the plaque erected in Dibdin's memory outside the church.

[5] Winchester records indicate that Dibdin had been admitted as a junior chorister in June 1756. Two school notebooks exist from Dibdin's studies at Winchester, dated 14 November 1754 and 14 October 1757. The first contains musical exercises, the second, parts of various anthems sung by Dibdin as a choirboy. The later notebook also contains early attempts at musical composition.

as an organist,[6] Dibdin accepted an apprenticeship with John Johnson, a highly reputable music publisher in Cheapside, where he spent his days tuning harpsicords, an endeavor he found neither gratifying nor lucrative. He did, however, enjoy the evenings entertaining Thomas and his friends with songs and improvisations on the harpsicord, though the comradery was short-lived after Thomas went to sea during the Seven-Years War and was taken prisoner by a French man-of-war. Left to his own devices, Dibdin composed a set of ballads, hoping that his employer Johnson would publish them, but Johnson refused. Undaunted, Dibdin managed to arrange a future performance of the songs by “the notorious Mr. [James] Kear, of stentorian memory” at Finch’s Grotto, a pleasure garden frequented by the lower classes, located on the western side of St. George Street, Southwark, near St. George’s Fields. Once Dibdin had secured a guarantee of performance, he found a publisher in Thompson and Son of St. Paul’s Churchyard, a family business that paid the composer three guineas (the equivalent of £3 3*s*) for the copyright and sold each song for three halfpence.[7]

It was not long after the publication of his Finch Grotto ballads that Dibdin was befriended by Richard Berenger, the son of Moses Berenger, a rich London merchant and his wife, Penelope, the sister of Sir Richard Temple, Baron Cobham. Twenty-five years older than Dibdin, Berenger was a minor poet, horseman, and bon vivant who would be appointed gentleman of the equerry to King George III after his accession in the fall of 1760. He was beloved in fashionable society and his friends included all the first-rate literary and theatrical personalities of the day, as well as members of Parliament and dignitaries at court. Berenger replaced Dibdin’s brother Thomas as his principal London patron, supporting him financially, exposing him to concerts, theatre, and opera, introducing him to the upper echelons of London society, and, most importantly, encouraging him to pursue a theatrical career. In his *Professional Life*, Dibdin explained:

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[6] In his *Professional Life* (1: 17) Dibdin notes that, while he did not find permanent employment as an organist, he often played the recessional at St. Bride’s Church in Fleet Street before he was sixteen years old.

[7] See Dibdin’s *Professional Life*, 1: 18–19, and Warwick Wroth, 241–242. In his *Dibdin Bibliography*, Edward Rimbault Dibdin gives the year of publication as 1760, but Finch’s Grotto, which opened in 1760, did not feature regular musical entertainment until 1764 when vocal and instrumental concerts took place every evening from May to September in an orchestra attached to a large octagonal music room decorated with paintings and flowers. It is possible, however, that Kear, who was a popular vocalist at Marylebone Gardens, may have performed the songs at the Grotto prior to 1764.

> Having lost sight of the church, and the counting-house—for, after I had broken off with Johnson, I had some idea of turning my thoughts to merchants-accounts—the very last thing upon earth for which I was calculated, my friend Berenger advised me to think of the stage. I had not yet seen a play in London; and, as to an opera, I had no conception of it. I had now, however, an opportunity of making up for lost time—for, in less than a month, through the influence of my friend, I had breakfasted with Johnny Beard; dined with [John] Rich; and joined Tommy Warren and Lord Sandwich, at the St. Alban's-street tavern, in a new prize-glee, composed by my much-lamented and most valuable friend, Dr. [Thomas Augustine] Arne.[8] (19–20)

In 1760, there were two "major" theatres in London, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, whose royal patents permitted them to perform regular drama (tragedies and comedies of five acts or less), as well as ballad opera, farce, pantomime, burlesque, masques, pastorals, burlettas, oratorios, and English opera, in a season that typically extended from September through May. During the summer months, the Little Theatre in the Haymarket produced a variety of entertainments including comedies, concerts, high-wire acts, comic lectures, pastoral plays, pantomimes, and mock Italian burlettas. Sadler's Wells Theatre in Clerkenwell, London, and the Theatre on Richmond Hill, south-west of London, also provided musical and theatrical entertainment during the summer months.

Italian opera and oratorios, which were customarily performed at the King's Theatre in the Haymarket, were also advertised at Hickford's Room in Brewer Street, and at the Great Room, on Dean Street, Soho. Novelty entertainment was also provided by the Pleasure Gardens around London: Ranelagh, Vauxhall, Marylebone, and the aforementioned Finch's Grotto. Situated in Chelsea, on the north bank of the Thames, Ranelagh provided entertainment from April to July in a large rococo rotunda fitted with tables and benches that permitted spectators to eat and drink and enjoy the show, performed on a central bandstand from seven to ten o'clock, in a kind of dinner-theatre atmosphere. A Chinese pavilion, added in 1750, an ornamental lake, gondolas, and sylvan walking paths added to the romantic ambiance of the garden. Vauxhall (the popular name for Jonathan Tyers's

[8] Beard was a celebrated tenor who was featured in many of Handel's operas and most of his oratorios. His father-in-law, John Rich, was manager of Covent Garden from 1732 through 1761. Warren was an English publisher, editor, and bookseller who also financed the world's first mechanized cotton-spinning factory. Lord Sandwich, John Montagu, was the eponymous inventor of the sandwich, First Lord of the Admiralty, and a great supporter of Captain James Cook's expeditions to explore the islands in the Pacific Ocean.

Spring Gardens) on the south side of the Thames in Lambeth, produced outdoor variety entertainment from May to August that included tight-rope walkers, hot-air balloon ascents, fireworks, and concerts. In the center of the expertly manicured gardens was a clearing with an octagonal bandstand where the performances occurred, across from two curved arcades that housed supper boxes for spectators. Like Ranelagh, Vauxhall featured romantic tree-line paths, a rococo rotunda and chinoiserie. Located on Marylebone High Street, Marylebone Gardens consisted of a brick-walled, eight-acre plot of fruit trees and graveled paths around a central oval bowling green on which a bandstand (with an organ) was constructed for musical performances, among which was the English-language premiere of Pergolesi’s intermezzo *La serva padrona* in 1758. Like other pleasures gardens, food and fireworks were also featured.

In addition to the venues mentioned, theatrical and musical entertainment was advertised in September 1760 at the Bartholomew Fair, outside of Aldersgate of the City of London, and Southwark Fair on the Bowling Green, Southwark. Both promised exotic entertainment with titles, such as *The Adventures of Timur Koran*, and *Don Quixote in England*, “adapted to the taste of all Ladies, Gentlemen, Bucks, Bloods, and Choice Spirits,” comic songs, dancing, and “a most extraordinary band of music” that (at Southwark) included violins, oboes, trumpets, and kettledrums. The virtually limitless variety of entertainment produced in and around London in 1760 was quickly absorbed by the fifteen-year-old Dibdin who noted those performances that most appealed to audiences of different classes. Berenger’s friend, David Garrick, the actor-manager at Drury Lane began his tenure at that theatre on 15 September 1747 with a prologue composed by Samuel Johnson (another of Berenger’s friends) that identified the theatrical philosophy of the age: “The drama’s laws, the drama’s patrons give, / For we that live to please, must please to live.” From the very beginning, Dibdin knew that if he was determined to make a living in the theatre, he needed to be sensitive to the mercurial tastes of the audience and be able to appeal to the public at large.

Although Berenger’s introducing Dibdin to John Rich initiated a theatrical career that spanned fifty years, his effect on the teenage Dibdin was not entirely positive. The bon vivant, who epitomized true elegance according to Johnson,[9] was always in debt from living beyond his means—an example Dibdin followed throughout his life. Moreover, being wined and dined by the upper echelons of society and the literary cognoscenti at an early age served to reinforce his sense of entitlement, which Dibdin enjoyed

[9] See Stone, *David Garrick: A Critical Biography*, 622.

as an admired and fêted chorister at Winchester and made him a difficult and carping collaborator.[10]

Nevertheless, Rich took an immediate liking to Dibdin whose voice he likened to that of Richard Leveridge, a celebrated bass vocalist and composer who performed in Purcell's *The Indian Queen*, *The Fairy-Queen*, and *King Arthur*, as well as Handel's *Il pastor fido*, *Teseo*, and *Rinaldo*, and composed scores for *Macbeth*, *The Island Princess*, and *Pyramus and Thisbe*. From 1726 until his death in 1758, he worked as the leading bass at theatres managed by Rich, enjoying a stellar reputation in pantomimes. Rich arranged to have Leveridge's roles copied for Dibdin, assuring him that, "if I would let him *larn* me, my fortune was made; and, as the first earnest of it, he intended to take me into his house, with a view that we might contrive a new pantomime" (*Professional Life* 1: 24).

Even though Dibdin refused to collaborate with Rich on the pantomime, he was hired as a singer at Covent Garden for the 1760–1761 season, where he performed in the chorus in productions of *Thomas and Sally*, an all-sung, two-act afterpiece by Isaac Bickerstaff and Thomas Arne, Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, with the addition of a "Solemn Dirge" composed by Arne, and *Comus*, a three-act masque, adapted from Milton by John Dalton and Arne. Dibdin's first season at Convent Garden may have been light in actual time spent on stage but it allowed him the opportunity to experience other plays in the repertory and familiarize himself with the idiosyncrasies of professional actors and musicians in the repertory system.

For the 1760–1761 season, Rich employed 70 actors and actresses, 30 dancers, and 13 singers who appeared in various combinations for 171 performances (including 10 oratorios during Lent and a post season benefit). The bill, which changed nightly, typically presented a main piece (3–5 acts) and an afterpiece (1–2 acts), interspersed with songs and/or dances; occasionally, a short play, farce, or prologue might begin the program. Since actors were required to remember the dialogue of a great many roles during the season, a prompter was installed on the left (audience right) side of the stage to hold the script and cue lines when necessary. Dibdin was especially fond of John Stede, Rich's septuagenarian prompter,[11] whose theatrical experience proved enlightening to the teenage performer: "His information was boundless; he had seen all the old actors; had been intimate with Booth,

[10] See *The Musical Times* (1 February 1886), 68, 69.

[11] Dibdin refers to Stede as "Steed" and an octogenarian, both of which are misleading. Stede was born on 11 March 1688 and died in September 1768 at the age of eighty. He would have been in his early seventies when Dibdin met him, and only four years older than Dibdin's mentor, John Rich. See David Hunter, "The Diary of John Stede, London Theatre Prompter from about 1710 to the 1760s."

Wilkes, and Cibber; and constantly gave me an entertaining and interesting history of their various merits, the whole tending to some point in favor of Garrick” (*Professional Life* 1: 37). While adding to Dibdin’s understanding of acting technique, Stede also schooled him in stage terminology as well as the technical aspects of theatre production, information that found practical expression when Dibdin began writing plays.

The prompter was also in charge of rehearsals which were often perfunctory since actors generally retained possession of their roles from one season to another; new plays in the repertory, however, were initially prepared under the direction of the playwright and/or actor-manager. It was during a rehearsal of *Thomas and Sally*, a new musical afterpiece in the 1760–1761 season, that Dibdin realized the potential value of his natural aptitude for music. In his *Professional Life*, he recalled:

> Listening one morning to a rehearsal of *Thomas and Sally*, I comprehended so closely the construction of the composition that I could think of nothing else for the whole day. The next morning, I attended also a rehearsal, when all that past so tenaciously adhered to my memory, that I went home and drew out a score of the whole entertainment, which was certainly; but, for such an uncommon effort, by no means to that degree which might have been expected—for I was not, at that time, sixteen. I soon saw that I should easily get at all I wanted. I instantly became my own instructor; and, with the austerity of the merest pedagogue, I set myself the most difficult possible tasks. (1: 22)

In his first season with Covent Garden, Dibdin had the time to become an avid theatregoer, a significant step in his development as a performer and theatre composer, enabling him to explore the systems in which music and theatre had existed on the English stage and the ways audiences embraced or denied them.[12] At Covent Garden, Dibdin was in the audience for Richard

[12] In his seminal book, *Drama, Metadrama, and Perception*, Richard Horny argues that individual plays relate to other plays as a system, which, in turn, intersects with other systems of literature, nonliterary performance, other art forms . . . and culture generally. Culture, as it centers on drama in this way, Hornby calls the “drama/culture complex,” and it is through the drama/culture complex, rather than through individual plays, that we interpret life. Citing the approach taken by Northrop Frye in his *Anatomy of Criticism*, Hornby suggests that the relationship of the individual work to the overall literary system is like that of *parole* to *langue* in Saussure’s structuralist linguistics. “*Langue* is . . . the underlying, unstated system of grammar, syntax, and semantics that speakers and listeners must master in order to make or understand individual utterances” (17). During the 1760–1761 season at Covent Garden, Dibdin began his study of the grammar, syntax, and semantics of the professional theatre.

Brome's ballad opera, *The Jovial Crew* which began the season (22 September 1760), Arne's edition of John Gay's ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera* (24 September 1760), Shakespeare's *Hamlet* and Garrick's dramatic satire, *Lethe* (1 October 1760), Moses Mendez and William Boyce's pastoral, *The Chaplet* (3 October), Edward Phillips's pantomime, *Harlequin Skeleton* (15 October), Lewis Theobald's pantomime, *The Rape of Proserpine, with the Birth and Adventures of Harlequin* (20 October), David Garrick's dramatic pastoral, *Florizel and Perdita* (22 December), Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice* (10 January 1761), Charles Macklin's comedy, *The Married Libertine* (28 January), Handel's oratorio, *Judas Maccabaeus* (6 February), Handel's *Theodora* (25 February), Handel's *Samson* (6 March), Handel's *The Messiah* (11 March), Thomas Otway's farce, *The Cheats of Scapin*, *A Comic Lecture* performed by Tate Wilkinson, and *The Cries of London* performed by Edward Shuter (26 March), and Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (2 April).

At Drury Lane, Dibdin saw *The Beggar's Opera* (23 September 1760), Benjamin Hoadly's comedy, *The Suspicious Husband* (17 October 1760), George Farquhar's comedy, *The [Beaux']Stratagem* (23 October), Ben Jonson's comedy, *Every Man in His Humour* (24 October), Nicholas Rowe's tragedy, *The Fair Penitent* (20 November), Garrick's edition of George Villiers's comedy, *The Rehearsal* (12 December), Rowe's tragedy, *Jane Shore* (8 January 1761), Arthur Murphy's comedy, *The Way to Keep Him* (10 January), George Colman's comedy, *The Jealous Wife* (12 February), Isaac Bickerstaff and Thomas Arne's oratorio, *Judith* (27 February), Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* (6 April), Sir John Vanbrugh's comedy, *The Mistake* (28 April), and Richard Bentley's comedy, *The Wishes; or, Harlequin's Mouth Opened* (27 July).

At King's Theatre in the Haymarket, the home of the Italian opera company, Dibdin attended Galuppi's, *Il mondo nella luna* (22 November 1760), Galuppi's *Il filosofo di campagna* (6 January 1761), Cocchi's *Tito Manlio* (7 February), and Bertoni's *La pescatrici* (28 April). At the Great Room, Dean Street, Soho, Dibdin experienced Geminiani's opera, *The Enchanted Forest* (15 April 1761); at Ranelagh, Dibdin heard Arne's masque, *The Judgment of Paris* (12 June 1761); and at the Little Theatre in the Haymarket, Dibdin saw Pergolesi's celebrated intermezzo, *La serva padrona*, in an English translation (14 July 1761).

It is impossible to know with any kind of certainty how a teenage boy who had never seen a play in London would have reacted to the vast variety of professional entertainment to which he had been exposed in his first season at Covent Garden. Remarks in his *Professional Life* indicate that he was particularly interested in the rival productions of *The Beggar's Opera*,

pitting his friend Beard’s Macheath against that of Lowe at Drury Lane. He might have found the scheduling of performances on alternate nights of special interest since many in the audience for the Drury Lane production on 23 September might have attended the Covent Garden version the following day in order to compare the performances. His own career as a chorister taught him that audiences are as much drawn to the performer as to the work performed, but he had yet to experience a rivalry between professional theatres. In his *Complete History of the Stage*, Dibdin lauded the music of *The Beggar’s Opera*, calling it “exquisite, natural, sweet, and delightful,” and boasted that the contest weighed heavily against Drury Lane: “Beard at the head of his phalanx was irresistible, and certainly at no period has the real excellence and true character of English music been so well understood or so highly relished” (5: 38, 128).

Encouraged by Berenger, who was Garrick’s friend, and Stede, who admired the actor, Dibdin availed himself of every opportunity to attend Garrick’s performances at Drury Lane.[13] With the exception of *The Beggar’s Opera*, every production listed above at Drury Lane featured Garrick in a principal role. Bentley’s *The Wishes*, which had been offered to both Rich and Garrick who refused it and produced by Arthur Murphy and Samuel Foote who rented Drury Lane for the summer season, caused a near riot at the first performance when the audience objected to seeing Harlequin hanged on stage. For the first time, Dibdin experienced the wrath of a British audience levelled against a play and quickly realized the power of the spectator to elevate or condemn a production.[14]

Of the productions he saw at Covent Garden, Dibdin appeared to have been especially taken with Moses Mendez’s pastoral, *The Chaplet*, writing in his *Complete History of the Stage*: “*The Chaplet*, so exquisitely set by

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[13] Years later, writing in his *Complete History of the Stage*, Dibdin recalled that “In the early part of my life, I was very fond of everything dramatic, and particularly curious to learn whatever I could relative to the Old School, as it was then called, but which appellation is now given to the School of Garrick. During the two last years of Rich’s life, old Steed [sic], who was at that time eighty, and who had been many years prompter at Covent Garden, was my theatrical mentor. . . . He was, as may be imagine, a most fervid advocate for the preceding race of performers, and did not spare Rich, who in imitation of his father had lowered the stage by pantomimes and buffoonery. . . . I heard, therefore, of course all his sentiments which, though somewhat bigoted, were pretty candid, and his opinion of Betterton was, that, though he allowed all his various merits as they had been described by [Colley] Cibber and his other admirers, yet taking everything into consideration, he was by no means equal to Garrick” (4: 232).

[14] See *The London Stage*, part 4, 2: 809, 876–877. See also *Biographia Dramatica* 3: 412–413.

Boyce, that it, perhaps, contains some of the sweetest and most delightful specimens of simplicity in music that can be conceived, was greatly to the honour of English taste eminently successful. [It is] by no means excellently written, but there is enough . . . to set such a composer as Boyce properly to work, and he has made such use of the opportunity that these are some of the proofs that music to perfection has been produced by English composers and tasted by English auditors" (5: 181). The simple plot centered on Damon, a free-spirited shepherd who enjoys women but not marriage and abandons the innocent, long-suffering nymph, Laura, to sow his wild oats. He subsequently pursues the worldly and vain Pastora, recently abandoned by her lover Palaemon, whom he expects will be an easy mark. However, when she plays hard to get, Damon realizes that if he wants either woman, he must agree to marriage and chooses Laura, severely bruising Pastora's ego in the process.

The Chaplet evidently inspired Dibdin to experiment with the pastoral form and, in quick succession, he produced two librettos, heavily indebted to Mendez in spirit, plotting, and vocabulary. *Conceit in a Cottage* depicted the plight of a poor, virtuous, and long-suffering shepherd, Philander, whose beloved, Flavilla, appears interested in Thyrsis, a rich, but vain and free-spirited swain. Silvius, her father, who supports Philander, and Bromia, her mother, who supports Thyrsis, complete the cast (except for the obligatory chorus of shepherds and shepherdesses). Ultimately, Flavlla chooses love over money and sincerity over hollow, honey-flavored expressions of romance. *The Suspicious Rustic* told the story of a jealous nymph, Cleora, who questions the fidelity of Leander (another honest and long-suffering shepherd) when a ribbon she gifted him is seen in the possession of her rival, Narcissa, a vain and worldly nymph, who had stolen the ribbon hoping to lure Leander away from Cleora. Though berated and insulted by Narcissa, her simple and honest lover, Dorilas, reveals the plot to Cleora and the couples find closure, Cleora no longer questioning Leander's devotion, and Narcissa acknowledging the error of her ways. Both pastorals are divided by French scenes into two acts, with dialogue written in rhymed couplets in an old-fashioned, heightened language. The lyrics for airs and recitatives are included throughout, though it is unknown if Dibdin set them to music.

Near the end of his first season at Covent Garden, where he had been paid at the rate of 5*s.* per performance, Dibdin married the daughter of a respectable tradesman, who "had no great share of beauty to recommend her" but brought a considerable dowry to the match. Although no record of a church wedding appears to exist, the parish register of St. Martin-in-the-Fields recorded a child, Charlotte Elizabeth, born to Charles and Elizabeth Dibdin on 28 March 1762, among the April baptisms. Dibdin had been

engaged for a second season at Covent Garden, but his salary was hardly enough to support to lifestyle to which he had become accustomed with Berenger, who began to distance himself from Dibdin once Rich became his patron. Dibdin’s total earnings during the first season amounted to £11 15*s.* 6*d*. nearly equivalent to the annual wage of a coachman. The security that accompanied membership in a successful tradesman’s family (whose annual budget might be estimated at £300 or more) was important in the development of Dibdin’s early career.[15]

During the 1761–1762 season, Dibdin repeated his singing roles in *Thomas and Sally*, *Comus*, and *Romeo and Juliet*, and added chorus parts in *The Fair*, a popular grotesque pantomime devised by Rich, and *The Coronation*, a spectacle designed to celebrate the coronation of George III, for which Dibdin was given the added responsibility of keeping the singers together as they walked in procession. Rich’s death on 26 November and John Beard’s subsequent management of Covent Garden had little effect on the progress of the repertory, which had already been decided, or the cast, who had previously been hired, and Dibdin ambled into the new year singing in the choruses of *Thomas and Sally* and *The Coronation*. On 28 January 1762, he appeared as a Huntsman, along with Beard, James Mattocks, Jonathan Legge, and other actor-singers, in Lewis Theobald’s pantomime, *Apollo and Daphne; or, The Burgomaster Trick’d*, and the rest of the season was spent alternating that role with his other chorus parts.

Although Dibdin often wrote about many of the plays and musical pieces he observed during his early career in London and their success or failure, he was most articulate in comparing Rich’s theatre management to that of Garrick. In the fifth volume of his *Complete History of the Stage*, he argues that,

> [Rich’s] situation was nevertheless fluctuating, for, though at times the run of successful pantomime filled his treasury, yet his ignorance of the common business of the theatre and want of discernment as to the merit of performers,

[15] See Robert Fahrner (1989), 18–19; Thomas Gilliland, 1: 317; Benjamin Crosby, 103. Little is known about Dibdin’s wife or the circumstances surrounding the marriage, which may have been out of necessity. Insisting that no imputation of any kind was levelled on the character of the wife, Crosby suggests that Dibdin married for money and abandoned his family when the money was gone. See also Liza Picard, 297–298. In his memoirs, William Hickey mentions that a woman named Burgess lived with Dibdin early in his theatrical career, but his assigning Dibdin to the character of Hodge in *The Maid of the Mill* questions his authority. See Peter Quennell, 50–51. It is generally accepted, however, that Dibdin began living with Harriet Pitt, a Covent Garden dancer, after she left the company at the end of the 1766–1767 season. See Fahrner (1989), 18–19.

> gave the other house a pre-eminence which, . . . bespoke the favour of the critical and the judicious, especially after it began to feel the influence of Garrick's management.
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> Thus, the success of Rich was by fits and starts. At Christmas, perhaps, his house overflowed, and caricature prints were circulated with Harlequin weighing down the theatrical scales, and Garrick, [Spranger] Barry, and all the force of Drury Lane kicking the beam; the infatuation over, his benches were empty and continued so till the French painter invented new scenery, and he perfected himself in new attitudes, and invented new pantomime tricks.
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> Rich, by this means, was of great utility throughout his whole management to the general theatrical interest. He was what a formidable minority are to an able ministry; and, though his measures were not so efficacious, yet it kept the exertions of his opponents braced to their full strength and vigor, and this, by the operation now and then of a lucky hit, wrought wonderfully in his favour, both as to advantage and popularity. We have seen one instance of this in *The Beggar's Opera*.
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> By these and other spirited instances of opposition he kept up a constant and formidable battle which it required very frequently the whole united force of his rivals to oppose. In spectacle he was confessedly superior to them; and as Garrick knew and felt this, he ought to have entered into no competition with him but have rested his sole expectation on the more respectable ground of giving every advantage to tragedy and comedy, and this he would probably have done had it not been that sufficient novelty was not to be procured. . . . To this it may, perhaps, be owing that Garrick was obliged to permit spectacle occasionally in his own defense. It, however, at length sapped the foundation of his popularity; for, when Rich brought out *The Coronation*, which so completely and deservedly triumphed over the stupid, niggardly, parsimonious apology for it, that had been for a few nights foisted on the public at Drury Lane, Covent Garden began to feel a powerful superiority. (125–129)[16]

During the summer of 1762, Dibdin participated in the Histrionic Academy at the Richmond Theatre at 10–18 Richmond Hill, the legacy of Theophilus Cibber's earlier attempts to circumvent theatre licensing laws by advertising free access to rehearsals by theatre students (at an attached drama school) with the purchase of snuff. The company, regulated by Astley Bransby and Edmund Burton, actors from Drury Lane, was respectable and well organized, in Dibdin's view:

> The whole business was a kind of summer frolic, for, whatever celebrated actors, and sometimes actresses, happened to be in town, they were sure,

[16] See also Robert D. Hume, "John Rich as Manager and Entrepreneur" in *"The Stage's Glory" John Rich, 1792–1761*, 54.

> either for pleasure, or from invitation, to take a trip to Richmond, and perform on a Saturday. We had, during that summer, [Edward] Shuter, [Thomas] Weston, Miss [Jane] Pope, and others, besides a detachment, occasionally, from [Samuel] Foote’s troop, and sometimes a dancer or an opera singer. One circumstance that highly entertained me was, as they considered this as mere fun and recreation, there was no getting Shuter or Weston to perform their usual parts.[17] Shuter chose King Richard, . . . and Weston desired that his name might be advertised for a song between acts.
>
> This last circumstance excited particular curiosity, as it was well known that Weston could not, what is called, turn a tune. The consequence was a full house; not in expectation of hearing the song, but some curious apology. The first act was finished, nobody had seen Weston; the second act was over, the stagecoach had arrived, but no Weston. At the end of the third act, as the characters went off at one side, he came on at the other. He was booted and spurred; he had a jockey-whip in his hand and was covered with dust from head to foot. . . . Some thought his conduct disrespectful and began to call out for an apology. “An apology!” said he, in a manner irresistibly laughable; and, then preparing himself, by fixing his features in a state as if they were chisel’d, out came, “Johnny Pringle had a little pig.” This was enough. The convulsions of laughter that echoed through the theatre are not to be described. . . . He got through the song, not without many a parenthesis of laughter, was encored twice, made his bow, walked off, and all without the alteration of a muscle. The song was afterwards introduced into [Foote’s] *The Mayor of Garratt*, and everybody knows with what success. I tried to make something of his singing both in *The Waterman* and in [*A*] *Christmas Tale*, but it would not do; Johnny Pringle was his chief d’oeuvre. (*Professional Life* 1: 38–41)

Dibdin returned to Covent Garden for a third season and added his repertoire the role of a Harvest Man in Lewis Theobald’s popular pantomime, *Harlequin Sorcerer, with the Loves of Pluto and Proserpine* on 1 November 1762, for which he was respectably noticed, and another chorus part in Rowe’s tragedy, *The Royal Convert*, on 15 November, participating in “A Solemn Hymn,” composed by Henry Purcell.[18] He was also present at the performance of Arne’s opera, *Artaxerxes*, on 24 February 1763 when Thaddeus Fitzpatrick, who had protested the termination of the half-price

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[17] Shuter, whom Garrick considered a comic genius, was famous for playing bluff, old men. Weston, who had appeared as the Doctor in *The Wishes; or, Harlequin’s Mouth Opened*, was also praised by Garrick for his comic portrayals. Weston originated the role of Tycho in *A Christmas Tale* and Robin in *The Waterman*.

[18] In his *Professional Life* (1: 42), Dibdin adds that he was encored for his solo, “Come and trip it as you go” in Arne’s *Comus*. By the 1762–1763 season, it appears that Dibdin had been elevated from chorus member to soloist.

policy[19] at Drury Lane the month before, instigated a riot at Covent Garden for the same cause. According to the *Gentleman's Magazine* (February 1763):

> The mischief done was the greatest ever known on any occasion of the like kind: all the benches of the Boxes and the Pit being entirely tore up, the glasses and chandeliers broken, and the linings of the boxes cut to pieces. The rashness of the rioters was so great that they cut away the wooden pillars between the boxes, so if the inside of them had not been iron, they would have brought down the galleries on their heads. The damages done amount to at least £2000. Four persons concern'd in the riot have been committed to the gatehouse.

Performances at Covent Garden were cancelled for five days to allow the carpenters to repair the theatre.

Before the season was over, Dibdin had published the first volume of *A Collection of English Songs and Cantatas* on a subscription basis, by which subscribers would pay the publication costs and receive a copy of the book, with their names listed at the front. Included among the 98 subscribers were Dibdin's brother, Thomas, and his seafaring friends; James Kent, Organist at Winchester Cathedral, other members of the Winchester faculty, and other organists at London churches; John Beard, Edward Shuter, and other actors, singers, dancers, and playwrights, from Covent Garden, Drury Lane, Haymarket, Ranelagh Gardens, and the fairs; as well as members of the Albion Society,[20] and general public, many of whom generously paid for

[19] A policy had been established that patrons coming to the theatre after the third act could pay only half-price, except during the run of a new pantomime. Patrons became riotous when Drury Lane and Covent Garden charged full price for entertainments that were not new pantomimes. See *Professional Life* 1: 62–64.

[20] The Albion Society, for which Dibdin composed an Ode, was one of dozens of convivial clubs of like-minded gentlemen who met at coffee-houses, chocolate houses and taverns for business, politics, or pleasure. Dibdin described the society, whose grand master was a pawnbroker, as "a kind of offset from the Masons; but, when the hours of business were passed, and they were tiled in, the manners did not appear to savor much of the solemnity of their profession, or that brotherly love which is supposed to characterize them" (*Professional Life* 1:43–44). See also M. Dorothy George, 273–275; Liza Picard, 199–200; Roy Porter, 178–179. In 1768, William Hickey encountered Dibdin in the company of composer James Hook, singer Samuel Champness, and actors James William Dodd and Charles Bannister, drinking and singing at the Globe Tavern at 46 Craven Street, up the lane from Ben Franklin's residence at number 36. The group were said to have been members of the Euphrates Lodge, which often met at the tavern. See Quennell, 76.

the printing of several copies (James Burgess, Esquire, for example, subscribed for twenty-four books).

In the summer of 1763, Dibdin traveled to Birmingham to perform at the King Street Theatre, under the management of Thomas Hall and Joseph Younger, both from Covent Garden. Exclusive of his performances at the theatre, Dibdin was engaged as a singer by the Birmingham Vauxhall, where he introduced several of his original songs and quickly became a popular favorite.

Back at Covent Garden for the 1763–1764 season, where he continued to sing in *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Royal Convert*, *Thomas and Sally*, *Comus*, and *Harlequin Sorcerer* (alternating as a Huntsman and a Witch). In January 1764, he added to his duties the role of Magician in Theobald’s pantomime, *Perseus and Andromeda,* and on 22 February, the glorified chorus role of Momus, the god of satire, in the three-act version of Kane O’Hara’s burletta, *Midas*, the first English burletta performed on the London stage. In O’Hara’s version, Midas is depicted as a corrupt and profligate Justice of the Peace, who, though already married, woos Nysa, one of Sileno, the shepherd’s daughters, while Damaetas, his clerk, has eyes on Sileno’s other daughter, Daphne. The arrival of Apollo (recently tossed out of heaven for spying on one of Jupiter’s dalliances) in the guise of a handsome shepherd, Pol, attracts the attention of Sileno’s two daughters and forces their mortal suiters to plot to rid themselves of the competition. Midas orders a singing contest between Pol and Pan, which he plans to rig in Pan’s favor, so that he can banish the loser. Instead of leaving, however, Pol throws off his disguise and reappears as Apollo, rewarding Sileno and his two daughters, and punishing Midas, Damaetas, and Sileno’s shrewish and conniving wife. Although Dibdin’s role had little part in the action and only six lines of dialogue and one solo air in the score (“No difference of character” to the tune of “There was a jovial beggar”), *Midas* left a lasting impression on the eighteen-year-old, planting the seeds of burlettas to come from his own pen. After nine performances, *Midas* was withdrawn and reworked as a two-act afterpiece that would reappear at Covent Garden two years later.[21]

On 21 May, Dibdin’s benefit night (shared with Edward Holtom, Buck, and Miss Sledge, performers in minor roles), he performed vocal parts in Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*,[22] and the principal role of Strephon in the two-act pastoral afterpiece, *The Shepherd’s Artifice*, for which he wrote the libretto and composed the music. Highly reminiscent of Dibdin’s two earlier

[21] For an appreciation of the production and score of *Midas*, see Dircks (1999), 44–50.

[22] Dibdin may have also performed the vocal parts in the 11 May 1762 production of *Macbeth* at Covent Garden, but his name did not appear on the bill.