

**McGill-ASECS 2011 Fellowship
Report**

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The chief objective of my residency at the Burney Centre (May–June 2011) was to examine Charles Burney’s private papers for possible evidence linking him to the ‘Scale to Measure the Merits of Musicians’, an evaluative table published in the December 1776 issue of the *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Signed pseudonymously (‘Justice Balance’), the chart uses a 20-point scale to compare two-dozen composers in seven constituent categories of musical excellence (from originality to productivity). The table was one of several published in British periodicals following the appearance, in 1743, of the English translation of Roger de Piles’s *Cours des peintures par principes* (1708). Still, it remains the only one applied to music and is a unique document in the British reception of composers and musical styles in the period between Handel’s death (1759) and Haydn’s arrival in London (1791).

The table and its authorship became the subject of one of my dissertation chapters, where I proposed Charles Burney as its possible author. His life-long interest in Astronomy made him familiar with the use of tables; the evaluations of composers in the ‘Scale of Musicians’ coincide with those in his published works (before and after 1776); in fact, the generosity shown to living composers matches his reputation as a champion of modern music; and half of the living composers in the ‘Scale’ happened to be subscribers to his *General History of Music*. What is more, in the third volume of the latter work, Burney publicly endorsed De Piles’s methodology:

And it seems, as if the merit of musical productions, both as to composition and performance, might be estimated according to De Piles’ steel-yard, or test of merit among painters [...] In this manner, a composition, by a kind of chemical process, may be decomposed as well as any other production of art or nature.

Unfortunately, this statement appeared in 1789, thirteen years after the ‘Scale of Musicians’. Hence my need to examine his private papers before that year.

During my residency at the Centre, I spent nearly three weeks examining Burney's correspondence and related material. The most impressive of my findings appears in a letter by William Bewley dated 18–19 March 1763:

I want to purchase a few solos, duets or sonata's [...] Give me a small recommendator list in your next, with a kind of balance, in de Pile's manner.

The letter establishes Burney's knowledge and ability to use de Piles's methodology well before 1776. Although his reply to Bewley does not survive, there is little doubt that he might well have produced the requested list and possibly others prior to 1776. Similar references to de Piles may have existed in letters no longer extant.

With only a fraction of Burney's correspondence and diaries available in published form, I was delighted to find almost the entirety of his writings, including copies of his long poem 'The Trial of Midas the Second' (original in Manchester), 'Materials towards the History of German Music & Musicians' (original in Yale), and hundreds of his letters assembled from collections across the globe. I would single out his detailed letter to Fanny dated 4 December 1786, where he offers a draft of what became his monumental chapter on Italian opera in Britain in the final volume of his *History* (1789). Of special interest to me were also his correspondence with Joseph Haydn and Thomas Jefferson (the latter regarding the construction of a special fortepiano).

Handel documentation being at the core of my research activity, I was happy to cull dozens of new references on the composer and his works from the writings of the entire Burney family, including the yet unpublished court journals of Fanny. In addition to manuscript sources, I had the opportunity to examine full runs of major 18th-century periodicals (*Gentleman's Magazine*, *Monthly Review*). The convenient location of the Centre in the McLennan library allowed me to use McGill's Rare Books and Special Collections library, where, among other things, I was able to establish a plausible date for the annotations in a wordbook of the *Beggar's Opera* original production of 1728.

The pleasure of immersing myself into the world of Charles Burney and discovering new things was coupled with a level of comfort that I have rarely encountered before. The spacious Research Associates' office and the adjacent kitchen made my stay thoroughly enjoyable, and the presence of a scanner in the main office saved me considerable time and expense in reproducing materials for future use. For all this, I have to thank McGill University and the American Society for Eighteenth-Century Studies for co-sponsoring my residency there. I am especially grateful to Professor Peter Sabor, director of the Burney Centre, and Dr. Richard Virr, Head of McGill's Rare Book and Special Collections for selecting a music historian for this year's fellowship and making their resources available to me, and Sarah Skoronski for administrative assistance.