

When British socialite Ann Ford's father demanded that she marry the Earl of Jersey a man nearly 30-years her senior (who had attempted to pay for her hand in marriage), she was desperate to find a way out. With money she borrowed from her well-to-do friends, Ann rented out some of London's most prestigious concert venues and launched a concert series to fund her own independence.

The dates of Ann's life alone (1737-1824) make her an unlikely subject for a concert by an ensemble interested in the history of music-making with voices and viols. The viol, once the instrument of choice for well-to-do English amateur musicians, fell out of fashion during the 18th century. By the time Ann performed her famous 1760-1761 concert series, the viol was far enough removed from contemporary musical culture to be regarded as an antiquarian oddity.

Yet, it seems that Ann took to the viol from a young age, and it is unquestionable that it played a central role in her life. The viol figures in three drawings and paintings of her. A book that Ann's husband Phillip Thicknesse (whom she married later of her own volition) wrote about Thomas Gainsborough, painter of Ann's best-known portrait, mentions that Ann's "fingers from a child had been accustomed to playing the *viola da gamba*."

While we don't know what drew Ann to this musical *passé* at such a young age, her interest in the antiquarian actually aligned her with her peers by the 1760s, the height of the Cult of Sensibility. Deidre Lynch, Professor of Literature at Harvard describes this cultural phenomenon: "We tend to remember the eighteenth century in Britain as an age of Reason. . . But . . . during this century, commentators promoted an account of human nature that centered on individuals' capacity for emotional responsiveness . . . To declare oneself a person of sensibility was to announce one's vulnerability, mental and physiological. "

In his article "Ann Ford Revisited," Peter Holman situates Ann within this cultural phenomenon: "Ann seems to embody the cult of sensibility on several levels. First, in her portrayal of herself as an innocent and virtuous woman at the mercy of an unscrupulous aristocrat . . . sentimental heroine." In addition to the viol, Ann's concerts included performances on several soft, gentle, obscure instruments: archlute, viol, guitars, and musical glasses.

Today, we have to rely on the written word to tell us about that which was intended for the ear. In 1758, a letter penned by poet William Whitehead reads, "She has a glorious voice, & infinitely more affectation than any Lady you know. You would be desperately in love with her in half an hour, & languish & die over her singing as much as she does herself in the performance." And in 1761, an account penned by Count Friedrich von Kielmansegge reads, "I went to hear Miss [Ford's] concert . . . she sings well, and has a good voice, accompanying herself on the 'viola di Gamba' and guitar, and gives her audience a varied entertainment."

In addition to a handful of letters and surviving advertisements for seven of Ann's concerts, the source that best helps us imagine Ann's musical abilities is an article printed in the 1806 edition of *Public Characters*. Something like a much more wholesome *People Magazine*, *Public Characters* was a compilation of biographies of English society's rich and famous sold annually

between 1798 and 1809. In *Public Characters*, we learn that from childhood, Ann “was taught music by the most eminent professors of the day.” Most importantly, *Public Characters* situates Ann within a circle of highly accomplished musicians, providing a list of eight celebrated professionals (mostly unknown today) who played with her on her concert series.

*Public Characters* also provides a detailed account of the public scandal that surrounded Ann’s concerts: advances made by several unwanted suitors, including the Earl of Jersey; the Earl’s promise to pay Ann 800 pounds a year if she would promise to marry him upon the death of his terminally ill wife; Ann’s father’s eagerness to promise her hand in marriage against her will; Ann’s attempted escapes from her father’s house; the planning of Ann’s concert series to fund her own independence; her father’s disapproval of her performing in public and attempt to have her arrested; and the exchange of public slander that Ann and the Earl of Jersey had printed to sully the other’s name.

Published when Ann was 68, there is so much that *Public Characters* tells us about Ann’s life: from her eventual marriage to Phillip Thickness, to her extensive travels, to her accidental entanglement in political cross-fire that lead to brief imprisonment in a French convent. We chose to make her 1760-161 concert series the focus of our program.

There are a few musical categories that recur in surviving concert programs: Ann’s own compositions, Handel arias, Italian arias (we could only identify one, by Thomas Arne), and solo music for plucked instruments and the viol. Ann reportedly composed several solos for the viol, all which are now lost. Instead, we’ve chosen viol solos by Carl Frederich Abel, one of the last famous viol virtuosos, to whom Ann’s abilities on the viol were compared to in several newspaper articles. Music by Ann that has survived includes her publication *Lessons and Instructions for Playing on the Guitar*. From this publication we selected both solo instrumental works, like “Lady Coventry’s Minuet,” and vocal music, like “Se tutti gli alberi” and “O Love Divine.”

Ann’s list of Handelian arias spans an enormous vocal range. It seems very unlikely that the same singer who enjoyed singing “Return, O God of Hosts” (which sits very low in the voice) would also enjoy singing the soprano showpiece “Sweet Bird,” with its stratospheric vocal gymnastics. Most likely, Ann selected her favorite Handel arias and sung them in keys of her own choosing. While this practice would not be encouraged in any conservatory today, it was common in Ann’s time. Handel himself was known to transpose his own arias to better fit individual singers whom he worked with. We chose those from the arias Ann sang that stay within Ashley’s mezzo-soprano range in their original key.

We also had many decisions to make when it came to vocal accompaniment. We know that Ann often performed with invited musical guests, but when and what these guests played isn’t always clear. Take, for example, this excerpt advertising her April 8, 1760 concert: “...The vocal Parts by Miss FORD, who will play a Solo on the VIOLE DI GAMBO; and a Lesson and Song accompanied with the Guittar. Signor Gwkottowsky will play a Concerto on the German Flute. SONGS: Non sai qual pena, Hush ye pretty warbling Choir, What tho’ I trace each Herb and

Flower, Ah se un Cor Barbaro.” Signor Gwkottowsky is the only musician listed, but the identifiable songs listed require additional stringed and keyboard instruments in their original form. Were there other musicians who are not mentioned in the advertisement, or did Ann provide her own chordal accompaniment on the viol, as she did on April 22, 1760?: “The Vocal Parts by Miss Ford, who will play a Solo, and accompany a Song (Oh Liberty, thou choicest Treasure) on the Viol di Gambo.” Regardless, it’s clear that Ann took a flexible approach to instrumentation, which we embrace in our performance.

The history of a piece of music is not just the history of how it was composed. It also includes the history of how it has been played and heard over time. In *Escape to the Stage*, we are excited to share a new listening experience with audiences while simultaneously celebrating the life and career of the extraordinary Ann Ford.