

The Charlotte Mary Yonge Fellowship

cmyf.org.uk

From Realism to Reserve: Undergraduate Essays on Charlotte Mary Yonge's The Heir of Redclyffe

Who's Playing that Music? Charlotte Yonge and Victorian Music Culture

EILEEN ARATA

Charlotte Yonge, author of *The Heir of Redclyffe*, never missed an opportunity to demonstrate proper morals within her novel. Whether a character battled their inner demons or gave helpful advice, morality seeped through the pages of the text and, hopefully, into the reader's life. One recurring tool Yonge used to deliver this message was music. She seems to turn her written words into song until the reader feels transported right next to Amy and Guy as they sing a sweet tune at the piano in the drawing room of Hollywell. Or perhaps the reader can hear Mr. Dixon playing his violin in a grand orchestra that fills up an entire theater. Indeed, many different forms of music could be heard throughout the Victorian Era, from elegant private homes to unruly public concerts ("unruly" in the 19th century sense). Despite being simply a common pastime for the landed gentry, Guy and Mr. Dixon's varying relationships with music give it a deeper meaning in the novel. Yonge uses this developing artform to show how music itself is neither fundamentally good nor bad; its use reflects the morality and religious devotion of the individual playing it.

To be completely and correctly understood, music of any era depends on the social and cultural state of its setting. Nineteenth-century England has been described as a land without music, but, upon closer inquiry, the English Musical Renaissance actually took place during these years (Wright). In the 1830s, at the beginning of the Victorian Age, traditional folk music was the most popular genre, and it was often played in saloons. While saloons in America at this time had cowboys and card games, their British counterparts housed singing, music, and theatrical performances (Norton). By the 1850s, saloons gave way to music halls that were decidedly less well behaved than their 18th century predecessors. "Contemporary" music with more humorous lyrics overcame folk music, and urbanization meant the middle class started to have a greater role in shaping the culture of England rather than the elites (Scott). Eventually entertainment and profit became the goal of music rather than showcasing an artform.

This renaissance partially happened due to industrialization, which made instruments and sheet music far more available to the budding middle class. Full-scale orchestras came into fashion

alongside brass and wind bands (Wright). For songwriters, the quality of music declined as sales grew. Because of this increased informality and desperation for income, musicians often had a depraved reputation, even those like Mr. Dixon who played in a classical orchestra. The upper classes rarely associated themselves with career musicians of any type, even though “music continued to be a polite accomplishment” inside their own homes, as evidenced by the increase in piano sales during the 1800s (“History of Musical Etiquette”). Playing music as a pastime was perfectly acceptable as a hobby like painting or hunting, but once an individual turned to music as a profession, the upper classes wanted little to do with them. While the landed gentry benefitted from advancements in instruments and songwriting, they left public performances to musicians in a social class far below themselves.

Perhaps music might have been a convenient hobby for Yonge to add details to the Edmonstones’ lives, but its role in the novel appears to be more intricate. All the Edmonstone girls can be seen playing music from time to time, even young Charlotte who was “wild to be a musician” since they are well-bred young ladies (Yonge 278). While these small mentions of music situate the story within the context of the upper class during this time period, these are not the important scenes of music that connect to the underlying meaning of the novel. The degree of Charlotte Yonge’s preaching can be debated, but her ethical message is evident in her characters and their actions. The moral characters, such as Amy and Guy, showcase honorable qualities, such as praying all the time and offering kindness to all those around them. The immoral characters, on the other hand, are portrayed as unhealthy influences to be avoided, such as Mr. Dixon who seemingly never did anything with God or religion in mind. While “music was... a subject on which [Guy and Dixon] could meet with equal enthusiasm,” their diverging personalities demonstrate how a single medium can have extremely different connotations based on its use (Yonge 143). Yonge utilizes music as a mechanism to highlight these contrasting moral stances, which are central to understanding the book’s overall theme.

Accordingly, as the moral center and Christ-like figure of the story, Guy has a joyful, humble, and healthy relationship with music. Right when he first arrives at Hollywell, Laura exclaims, “You sing better than any of us!” (Yonge 21). His skill, the reader soon learns, comes from his mother, “a musician’s daughter,” since his grandfather, Old Sir Guy, never nurtured his gift (Yonge 28). Even though Guy never had the chance to meet his young, talented mother, every time he opens his mouth to sing, he has a connection to her. For this reason, he does not mind the social connotations surrounding music and continues to sing whenever the opportunity arises; he sings simply to bring joy and praise. Another great relationship in his life, with Amabel, also stems from music. The two of them can be found at the piano throughout the first half of the novel, and after Guy dies, Amy is “unable to bear... the sound of music” (Yonge 484) until she “bring[s] down her little girl” at Redclyffe to hear the piano Guy bought for her (Yonge 505). Music becomes a symbol of great familial love in this book, and even though little Mary Verena lost a parent just like her father, she has music to connect her to heaven, just like her father.

As an avid member of the Oxford Movement, Yonge considered religion when gifting her main character with this trait since Tractarians promoted “reserve, containment, a discipline of

emotions and liturgical regularity,” which was often exhibited through music (Martin). This support of traditional liturgies and polite music is paralleled in Guy’s own actions, especially since he “had such a horror of singing anything... religious feeling to mixed or unfit auditors” (Yonge 161). This author used her star character to illustrate that music based in morality is only fit for worthy ears. Additionally, when Guy gets rid of all improper distractions, “no regular recreation but walking and music” remained; music only survived because “he thought... there were higher ends for [it]” (Yonge 86). Even at a time when inappropriate songs populated Victorian music halls, Guy still holds on to music, allowing Yonge an opportunity to show how music can still do good and praise God if an honest person is behind the notes. Later in the novel, when Guy is basically exiled at Redclyffe away from those he loves, the village choir comes to his window to sing Christmas carols. Even though Guy is “sad and oppressed,” the music brings “the unchangeable joy and hope of Christmas” and convinces him that the future still has similar joy and hope (Yonge 259). The power of a few songs from a friendly, if not wholly professional, group had the ability to restore Guy’s hope despite his loneliness. Guy’s experiences with music lead him to good things, and this perfect picture of an angelic musical encounters gives a clue to how Yonge, a Tractarian, thought music should be used.

An ardent critic of Guy’s, as always, is Philip Morville, who simply cannot understand why Guy uses his talent so openly. Not long after meeting Guy, Philip comments that he should not “make much of this talent in public; it is too much a badge of [Guy’s] descent” (Yonge 28). Later on, he again mentions Guy’s “musical temperament” (Yonge 58), which is a nod to the Victorian norm that “music was constructed as feminine” (Peak). A 19th century reader would most likely have agreed with Philip in this instance since normal people would have considered Guy’s singing abilities a sign his undesirable parentage and softness of character. However, at this point in the novel, Philip is painted as the antagonist, and Yonge intends to put the reader against him. If the reader should disagree with Philip, perhaps Guy’s music is innocent enough to overcome the social stigma of the day.

The other major source of music in this book, Mr. Dixon, has a decidedly less favorable reputation. Yonge’s favored characters are almost always religious and moral, and Mr. Dixon is decidedly neither. This background, along with the need for a more permanent antagonist than Philip, causes the creation of Mr. Dixon, an immoral musician and Guy’s uncle. While Guy sang solely for worship and humble joy, Dixon needed music to earn a living since he “was often in considerable distress for money” (Yonge 188). As part of the numerous Victorian musicians who made music into an industry, Dixon showed that the value of art was lost to the value of the pound. Even when he got a contract, he used the money he earned to lead “a careless, extravagant life” and was “an evil friend” (Yonge 142). Now, music itself is not to blame for Dixon’s misfortunes and irresponsible personality. The situation is quite the opposite; this violinist’s financial problems stem from his unethical personality, which is exactly why Yonge exemplifies him as a terrible role model for Guy and the reader alike. Guy’s unfortunate uncle takes the beauty of music and desecrates it with his unholy habits.

Music may not appear in *The Heir of Redclyffe* as often as literature or flowers, but it still adds another layer of complexity to this story of morality. Yonge wrote this famous novel with clear religious overtones to partially promote her own beliefs, which connect to music through the people

playing it. Guy Morville, arguably a Jesus figure, gives music an air of happiness and joy while Mr. Dixon perverts it in his sinful ways. Through polar opposite examples of how music was used in the Victorian Era, Yonge shows the consequences of taking a gift God has given and mixing it with the detrimental side of human nature. She sounds a warning to all reading the book to take care of the talents they have been given, for, just like Guy, you will receive more sincere happiness and peace throughout your life.

Works Cited

- “History of Musical Etiquette.” *The History of Musical Etiquette*, Victoria and Albert Museum, Cromwell Road, South Kensington, London SW7 2RL. 21 May 2013, www.vam.ac.uk/content/articles/t/history-of-musical-etiquette/.
- Martin, David. “Music and the Aesthetic in Worship and Collective Singing: England since 1840.” *Society*, vol. 53, no. 6, 2016, pp. 647–655., doi:10.1007/s12115-016-0078-5.
- Norton, Caroline, et al. “Victorian Era Music Facts: Traditional Folk Songs and Songwriters.” *Victorian Era Life in England. Victorians Society & Daily Life*, victorian-era.org/victorian-music.html.
- Peak, Anna. “The Condition Of Music In Victorian Scholarship.” *Victorian Literature and Culture*, vol. 44, no. 2, 10 June 2016, pp. 423–437. *ProQuest*, doi:10.1017/s1060150315000716.
- Scott, Derek B. “Music and Social Class in Victorian London.” *Music and Social Class in Victorian London*, The Victorian Web, Dec. 2015, www.victorianweb.org/mt/scott1.html.
- Wright, David C. H. “Music and the Making of a Middle-Class Culture: A Comparative History of Nineteenth-Century Leipzig and Birmingham by Antje Pieper; Thomas Tallis and His Music in Victorian England, by Suzanne Cole.” *Indiana University Press*, vol. 52, no. 2, 2AD, pp. 329–332.