

# Family matters

*At 8, Queen Street, Edinburgh, on the 22d current, Mrs THOMSON, widow of the late John Thomson, Esq. Professor of the Theory of Music in this University, of a son.*

This notice from Edinburgh newspaper *The Caledonian Mercury*, on 25 November 1841, caught my eye while I was researching another possible source for our first-year students to explore.

Newspapers are particularly rich sources for studying the history of musical life in this period, containing information on events, publications, professional musical life and much more: digitalisation makes these sources easily accessible and, of course, easily searchable. Sometimes, however, it is the things that we come across by accident, while looking for something else, that grab our attention.

John Thomson's tenure as the first Professor appointed under the terms of John Reid's bequest was a short one. He had only recently organised the first, highly successful Reid memorial concert when he died in May 1841, possibly without knowing that a child was on the way. Under the circumstances, those left behind may well have read something into the date on which Thomson junior entered the world: 22 November is, of course, St Cecilia's Day.

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# Our 1841 Calendar

Inspired by one of the students in our 2020-21 cohort, we're building up a calendar of musical and related events in the year 1841. Gradually, this will include links to primary sources where available, and commentaries on these sources and what they tell us.

You can access the Calendar [here](#). We'll continue to edit it as new information becomes available.

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## 1841 General Election

Voting in the 1841 General Election started on 29 June and continued until 22 July. Songs written for the

**election campaign feature among the primary sources for this project.**

The election would see the Conservatives, led by Robert Peel, take power from the Whigs, led by William Lamb, 2nd Viscount Melbourne. This was the last time the Whigs were in government in the UK.

**Secondary sources:**

Isobel White and Mary Durkin, General Election Dates 1832-2005 – UK Parliament House of Commons Library, Standard Note SN/PC/04512

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# About this project

**What music were people in Edinburgh making, creating, enjoying in the year 1841?**

**What part did this music play in their lives?**

**And how do we know?**

This blog gathers material on the musical histories of Edinburgh in and around the year 1841. It builds on research conducted by first-year undergraduate students at the Reid School of Music as part of their course "Thinking About Music". The final few weeks of this course take the form of a research module, during which students work in groups to investigate specific aspects of musical life in Edinburgh in and around the year 1841. Starting directly from primary sources such as concert listings, newspaper articles and sheet music, and under the guidance of teaching staff, they try to find out as much as they can about their sources and the musical life these sources document.

**Why 1841?**

There are many reasons why the year 1841 was selected. It was the year of the first ever Reid Concert, a series set up as part of the legacy left to the University by General John Reid, and which still runs today. Reid's legacy also led to the establishment of the post of Professor of Music at Edinburgh: the first incumbent, John Thomson, was appointed in 1839 but died in 1841; his successor, the renowned composer Henry Bishop, was also appointed in 1841. For us here at the

Reid School of Music, then, the year 1841 is very appropriate; and other, external factors make it appealing as well:

- 1841 was the year of the first British census for which we have detailed historical records, which could help us find out more about the people who lived in Edinburgh at that time.
- Several important and relevant musical publications appeared in that year, including the final volume in George Thomson's long running "select" collection of Scottish songs (a volume to which Henry Bishop contributed), and also the volume *The Vocal Melodies of Scotland*, edited by Finlay Dun together with John Thomson, who also wrote an introductory essay.
- And finally, musical visitors to Edinburgh that year included a certain Franz Liszt.

These are important starting points for us – but they are just that, starting points. These are the names that it's easy to identify – names already well known, even if the details of their lives and works are in some cases much less well known today. What about the other lives, however? How much can we find out not just about these men but also their audiences, and the many other women, men and children who sang, played, listened, danced, discussed and invested time and money in music in this city of Edinburgh almost two centuries ago?

## **Academic standards**

This page is built around research conducted by students at the very start of their academic careers. Original research is not normally conducted by students at this stage: often, the first really original research students undertake comes during final year dissertation projects, and it's generally not until well into postgraduate studies that an emerging academic will see their research published. In our course "Thinking About Music" as well, conducting original research makes up only a very small part of the course. It's an important part,

however, because it underlines that universities are about the creation of knowledge, not just its recreation or replication.

This knowledge ultimately must serve the common good. There has been relatively little historical work done on musical life in Scotland in this period (or most periods, in fact). Through this blog, we hope to share this information with anyone who is interested, and thus contribute to building more knowledge in this field.

There is no expectation on students that they produce something that can be published here – and no limits set in terms of how they communicate their findings, except that anything published must conform to the standards of good academic practice: in other words, it must be original work, properly evidenced, and with credit given where it's due. Checking that this is the case will be carried out by teaching staff.

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## **A message from our sponsor**

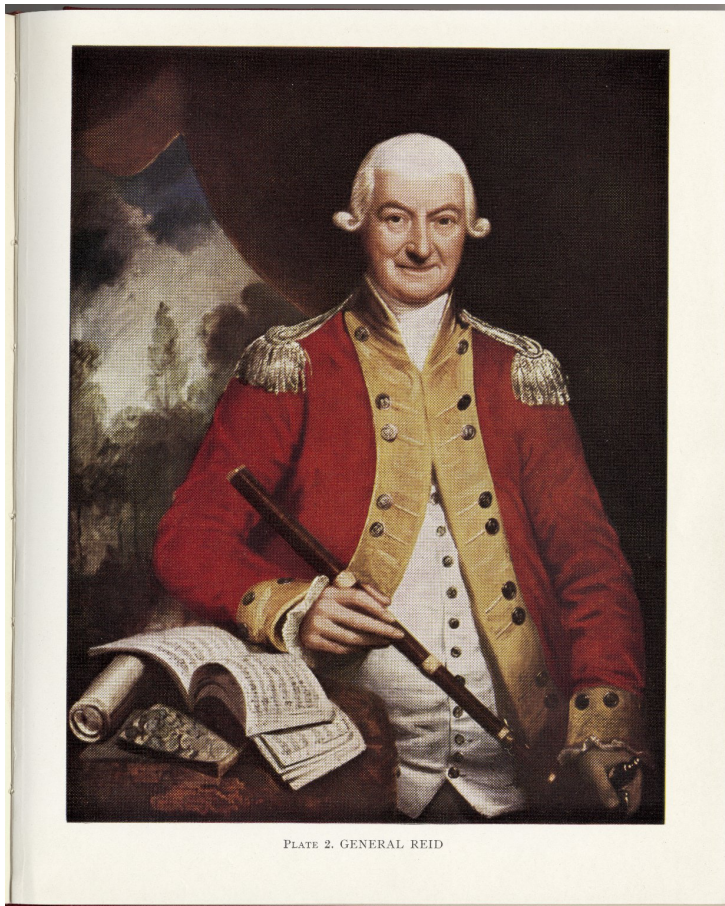


PLATE 2. GENERAL REID

Portrait of John Reid © The University of Edinburgh; full catalogue information at <https://images.is.ed.ac.uk/luna/servlet/s/94q844>

The Reid School of Music is named for General John Reid, who left money to the University for the establishment of a Chair in Music and an annual concert, also to be held in his name.

As the portrait featured here shows, Reid was an accomplished flautist and also a composer: his most famous piece is the military march "The Garb of Old Gaul".

Although Reid died in 1807, the first Professor of Music was not appointed until 1839, in the form of John Thomson. Thomson, however, remained in post only for a very short time: he died in 1841, the same year as the second part of the terms of Reid's legacy was fulfilled with the very first Reid

Concert.

Reid inherited most of his fortune from his cousin, also an officer in the British military. Both men were involved in military campaigns in colonial North America. We do not know at this stage to what extent or how directly Reid's fortune was linked to colonisation and settlement, but it is probably that some of Reid's inheritance was linked to this.

More on Reid's music from the Reid Concerts database

Institute for Advanced Studies in the Humanities' project on decoloniality



