Ann Ford

Ann Ford (1732–1824) was a performer on the musical glasses, well known in London, and the first to publish a ’method’ on how to play them.

She was the only child of Thomas Ford, solicitor [lawyer] and Clerk of the Arraigns, and his wife (née Champion), the niece of Dr. Ford, the Queen’s physician, and of Gilbert Ford, Attorney General of Jamaica.

How Ann received her musical training is unknown, but by her late teens she was apparently an accomplished musician who sang and played the English guitar and viola da gamba. She gave Sunday amateur concerts at which she was joined by eminent professionals like Dr. Arne, composer of Rule Britannia and Signor Tenducci the popular singer. These concerts were attended by the best society. On October 2, 1758, an attendee described a performance of Julius Caesar in which Ann Ford participated:

> They introduced a procession of vestals to mourn over Caesar’s body [O]ne of them sang a dirge divinely well. She is, I think, take her for [what] she is . . . the most pleasing singer I ever heard I don’t dare say the best because I have not judgment enough to decide, but I know that I would rather hear her than any Italian I have yet heard. She is a Miss Ford, daughter of a sort of Lawyer in the city.[1]

Ann was not content with these private parties-she longed to perform in public. Her father, however, “held sound, if old-fashioned, views about woman’s place. It was, he maintained, in the home, and the less she gadded about the better”[2] He forbade any public performances, even as an amateur. When she was 23 her father actually obtained a magistrate’s warrant to confine her to his house to prevent her from performing.[Leppert, 40] Arrested a second time for the same ’offense’, she escaped from her ’paternal prison’ to the house of her closest and dearest friend, Lady Elizabeth Thicknesse, who gave her sanctuary. Mrs. Thicknesse enabled her to make arrangements for a series of five

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[1] ??? Letter 2 October 1758 from Mr. Frances Greville to Dr. Burney from Wilbury, quoted in Highfall, 5:365

[2] Gosse, 129

subscription concerts, which took place beginning March 18, 1760 at the Haymarket Theater, running through April. [1].

The advertisement for her first concert specified that she would "play a solo on the Viol da Gamba" (an instrument somewhat like the cello-held between the player's knees). This was somewhat scandalous as the viol da gamba was an instrument conventionally reserved to male performers. She also sang and played the guitar. The violinist Thomas Pinto, and other instrumentalists also contributed pieces.[2] No musical glasses yet.

Her father attempted to thwart the concerts by blocking the streets around the concert hall with Bow Street Runners—'bouncers' employed by the major London theaters on a regular basis to apprehend pickpockets and generally keep the peace.[3] But Lord Tankerville dispersed them by threatening to turn out a detachment of the Guards. Naturally after this kind of publicity there was a rush to buy tickets, and in no time a sum of £1500 had been subscribed. The outlandishness of this venture can be seen by observing that hers were the only subscription concerts held in London between 1756 and 1763, which were "quite outside the mainstream," with "fashionable and sizeable" audiences "perhaps more attracted by the scandal than her music."[4] Her father also offered her a settled income if she would cease from public performance—she declined.[5] Gainsborough's "Ann Ford/Thickness"

Before she was 20 she had been painted by Nathaniel Hone (1718–1784) in the character of a muse.[6] And in 1760 Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) painted his famous portrait of her. The Thicknesses were friends and benefactors of Gainsborough—Phillip Thicknesse (1719–1792) would go on to write the first biography of Gainsborough[7] And Gainsborough and Miss Ford were both in fashionable Bath in 1758, when he painted a portrait of Lord Villiers, son of the third earl of

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[1] Lydia M. Middleton, The Dictionary of National Biography [???]] [advertised in the Public Advertiser 7908 (Mar. 5, 1760), 7908 (Mar. 11, 1760), 7923 (Apr. 8, 1760)

[2] Gosse, 130

[3] Heard, 144

[4] McVeigh, 14

[5] Rosenthal, 3

[6] Gosse, 129

[7] Thicknesse, Phillip, A Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, Esq.; London, 1788

Jersey. (We shall meet his father, the aged and ailing Earl of Jersey presently.) This circle included William Whitehead, from whom we get a glimpse of the effect Miss Ford had:

> I have seen Miss Ford, nay almost lived with her ever since I have been here. 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 in performance.[1]

Gainsborough had moved to Bath in Oct. 1759 to improve his fortunes, and rapidly built a reputation for painting superb likenesses. One well-worn tactic for promoting yourself was to display prominently in your painting room a striking, full-length portrait of a person who was then in the public eye. So, in 1760, a visitor to his studio would have been confronted with Ann Ford’s full-sized portrait: 197 x 135 cm (77 1/2 x 52 7/8 in.), by far his most ambitious full-length work to date, a portrait of “stunning virtuosity and coloristic bravura.”[2]

The picture certainly attracted attention. On October 23, 1760, Mrs. Mary Delany visited Gainsborough’s studio and was struck by “Miss Ford’s picture, a whole length with her guitar, a most extraordinary figure, handsome and bold; but I should be very sorry to have any one I loved set forth in such a manner.” The portrait was, after all, by the standards of the day, borderline risqu. Joseph Burke has noted how Miss Ford “. . . crosses her legs above the knee, a masculine freedom unrecorded in the female portraits of Rubens and Van Dyck. . . . An air of high breeding redeems the suggestion of wantonness in the bold asymmetrical pose,” a judgment borne out by a contemporary conduct book, which advised women against crossing their legs in company, “for such a free posture unveils more of a masculine disposition than sits decent upon a modest female.”[3]

It was in the “Gainsborough circle” that Miss Ford met the Earl of Jersey, who was as captivated by her as everyone else. It appears Miss Ford had some sort of an affair with him, which included his offer of the enormous sum of eight hundred pounds per annum to come into

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[1] William Whitehead, ms. “Letters I,”, quoted in Rosenthal, 2

[2] Rosenthal, 1

[3] Burke, J, English Art 1714-1800 (Oxford, Oxford U Press, 1976), 213-14

Figure 1: Gainsborough's *Ann Ford*

his keeping. She declined. The affair ended in a violent quarrel, ultimately carried out in print. She published a thinly disguised pamphlet entitled A Letter from Miss Fxxd, addressed to a Person of Distinction, of which the following is a sample:

> When your L..d..p, on your knees, and with tears trickling down your aged cheeks, swore the sincerity of your love; when you told me you could not help your age, if I object to that, but every proof which was in your power I might command: You know, I then told your L..d..p, that your age and person were both very agreeable to me. I should have preferred you to any other man in the Kingdom, had you been single[1]

Her pamphlet sold 500 copies in the first five days. A year later it was reprinted, and at the same time appeared a reply from the Earl: A letter to Miss F..d, which quickly ran into a second edition.[2] And the January and February 1761 editions of the Gentleman's magazine treated readers to long excerpts from Ford's and Jersey's pamphlets. The Earl of Jersey also attempted to sabotage a concert by arranging an alternative entertainment to which he induced many of her invited guests to go instead.[McVeigh, 168] Unfortunately, in the court of public opinion, Ann came off the worse.[3]

Sometime before October Ann built a set of musical glasses and learned to play them—perhaps from Pockrich.[4] From October 24 to 30, 1761 Ann gave another a series of concerts, advertised to include "English airs, accompanying herself on the musical glasses"[5]. These concerts were far less ambitious: she "engaged the large room, late Cox's auction room" instead of the Haymarket Theater, and tickets cost one fourth of what she had charged in the spring of 1760.[6]

On November 2, 1761 she published the first 'method book' for playing the musical glasses: Instructions for Playing on the Musical Glasses,

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[1] quoted in Gosse, 132

[2] Gosse, 130

[3] For a lengthy discussion of Ann's plight, see Rosenthal, 4ff

[4] ??? She is stated by Gratton Flood, op.cit. p.289 (Encyclopedia Britannica, 11th ed. s.v. Harmonica?) to have been a pupil of Pockrich.

[5] advertised in the Public Advertiser 8407 (Oct. 14, 1761)

[6] Rosenthal, 9

about which we will have more to say presently.

She also performed occasionally at Thomas Sheridan's lectures on Elocution. (In 1762 Sheridan published his Lectures on Elocution.) This came to an end in December, when the St. James's Chronicle[for 3 December 1761] announced that Ann Ford was to be replaced by Miss Lloyd:

> At Mr. Sheridan's lecture on Elocution, Miss Lloyd succeeds Miss Ford in performing on the musical glasses for the amusement of genteel company.[1]

Elizabeth Thicknesse was expecting her sixth child, so Ann came down from London to be with Elizabeth in her confinement and to accompany the Thicknesses to his purchased post as lieutenant-governor of Landguard Fort, Suffolk. In January 1762 the baby was born, but three months later Lady Elizabeth died, leaving behind three sons and three daughters.

On this Mr. Thicknesse was greatly affected, left the spot where she died; and after paying a last tribute to the virtues, and erecting a monument to the memory, of his departed wife, he consigned the care of his family to Miss Ford, who acted during his absence with such discretion and propriety, as to ensure entire approbation on his return. Time and a change of scene at length abated his grief; and he began to think that no one could better supply the loss of his lady than her most intimate friend.[2]

And so it was that on September 27, 1762 Ann Ford became Thicknesse's third wife. Ann was now 25, he was 43. Ann's father refused to attend the wedding.[3]

That was apparently the end of Ann's short but extraordinary musical career.

Thicknesse was hardly a prize catch. He was notorious as an ardent supporter of the slave trade, a blackmailer, a lecher and a sadist. Famous for his ill temper, he fell out with many local people. He frequently published attacks on the people he disliked, which even led to

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[1] Quoted in Toynbee, letter 351, fn.2

[2] Gosse, 127

[3] Gosse, 128

his imprisonment for libel. [???]

Gillray sums up Thicknesse's character in a caricature of him entitled "Lieutenant Governor Gall-Stone", depicting him with an explosive jet of steam coming out of his head. One of Thicknesse's nicknames was 'Dr Viper', reflected in this print by the medusa-like creature sits at his shoulder. This is Alecto, one of the Furies of Greek mythology, who has emerged from the jaws of hell to offer him assistance. This caricature is a parody it is a parody of the conventions of formal oil paintings, in which gentlemen are portrayed in their studies, depicted as learned and serious, surrounded by books.

But look! In the upper right-hand corner! Who do we see? (See figure 3)

Gillray shows Thicknesse, his hands raised in admiration, standing behind Ann! She is shown playing her musical glasses to an audience of pigs, one of which is moved to tears. She is accompanied by an orchestra of little devils.

This caricature was published in 1790—perhaps Ann continued to perform on her glasses.

She certainly continued the literary career she began with her Instructions for Playing on the Musical Glasses by publishing *Sketches of the Lives and Writings of Ladies of France* in three volumes (1778-1781) and a novel, *The School for Fashion* (1800). She apparently raised Philip's six children (never had any of her own), and accompanied her husband in eight changes of residence in England, Spain and France (including during the French Revolution!). In the fall of 1792 Philip Thicknesse died in Ann's arms in a coach on the way from Paris to Boulogne.[Gosse, 313] On his monument Ann had inscribed:

> Phillip Thicknesse . . . He married thrice . . . thirdly [to] Ann Ford, his now affectionate and afflicted widow, who inscribes this stone to her ever honoured and beloved husband, as the last mark she can give of her gratitude and unbounded love to the memory of a man with whom she lived thirty years in perfect felicity.[1]

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[1] Gosse, 314

Figure 2: Gillray's *Lieutenant Governor Gall-stone*

Figure 3: Detail of Gillray's *Lieutenant Governor Gall-stone* showing Ann Ford

Ann was subsequently arrested and confined to a convent (as were all unaccompanied English women in France at that time) and upon the death of Robespierre in 1794 she was released. [Gosse, 313–4] She eventually returned to England, lived her last 18 years with her friend Sarah Cooper, and died at age 86 in January 1824.[1]

Ann's Instructions for Playing on the Musical Glasses begins:

> As the Tones of the Musical Glasses are, from their Similitude, more like the human Voice, than any musical Instrument, that ever was, or perhaps ever will be invented: there is much Reason to suppose, these Glasses will, in a short Time, become as common a piece of Furniture as an Harpsichord: and that every Lady, who can play or sing (but more particularly the latter) will be furnished with an Instrument, in itself of no great Expence: an Instrument, that not only sets off the Voice with greater Advantage than any other : and if I was to say, will assist and improve the Voice, I do not think I should say more than is due to the exquisite Tone it produces : a Tone superior to every other Instrument, and perhaps, the only one from which you hear the Effect without Cause.

She goes on to describe how to build and play an instrument. From the one illustration in her method, it appears that her instrument did not have all the sharps and flats.

She concludes:

> I have consulted an ingenious Organ-Builder who is very confident he can give the same Touch to these Glasses, and

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[1] Highfill 5:366