

Performing English Taste: Charles Nicholson's 'Gothick' Style

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Abstract

Flutist Charles Nicholson (1795–1837), the first native professional instrumentalist to achieve star status in Britain, achieved prominence with performances located firmly in national, class-based, and gendered distinctions. Nicholson presented a manly, sentimental, and heroic persona sharply distinguished from those of non-native artists. His 20-year career developed and embodied a musical manner considered appropriate for English middle-class men, a set of tastes and practices that guided British wind playing through a century of political, social, and artistic upheavals after his death.

Despite—or because of—its popularity, Nicholson's playing attracted significant critical comment. His 'Gothick' taste was compared unfavorably with the classical style of continental musicians; yet such a contrast served only to confirm him in the role of champion to Englishmen, many themselves amateur flutists. Amid a musical scene in which virtuosi cultivated a quality of individual genius in their playing, Nicholson broke new ground by permanently fixing precise details of his performance and giving amateurs the tools to reproduce it: as well as giving private instruction he licensed his special instrument design for commercial production and documented his playing technique with unprecedented precision in several tutors published in 1816-36. This package gave his partisans a complete script to re-enact his musical practices at home, thereby sharing a personal identity that was conspicuously masculine, British, appropriately sensitive, and authentic.

This paper will introduce Nicholson's career and the discourses in which it has been discussed, drawing on and illustrating recent studies of performance practice, taste performance, the classical canon and concert culture, and the construction of musical value and reputation. It will use Nicholson's case to argue that artistic values are best analyzed as properties emerging from an act of social engagement with aesthetic materials, rather than qualities inherent in the materials themselves, and suggest that performance practice and musical meaning are so interdependent that neither of these studies can afford to neglect the other.