1

The Calcutta Piano Trade in the Late Eighteenth Century

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A significant factor in the trading strategy of London music retailers during the eighteenth century was their growing awareness of the demand for musical instruments among the inhabitants of the British overseas settlements. The early focus of this incipient colonial market lay along the eastern seaboard of North America and in the West Indies, but profitable trading opportunities were also beginning to emerge in the East, following the growth of British interests in the region.[1] The transformation of India into a lucrative market for European instruments stemmed from the political earthquake that struck in the 1760s. The Mughal Empire in the first half of the eighteenth century, following the reigns of the four 'great' Mughals, Akbar, Jahangir, Shah Jehan, and Aurangzib, was characterized by instability and a palpable sense of decline. When it finally came, the collapse of the long-established order was decisive. In Bengal in the north-east, the power vacuum was, remarkably, filled by a commercial organization: the British East India Company. Its first trading station, established soon after 1600, had been in Surat. During the following century, what were to become the three great coastal

[1] A full-length account of music in the Anglo-Indian community, in both India and England, will appear in Ian Woodfield, *Music of the Raj: A Social and Economic History of Music in Late Eighteenth-Century Anglo-Indian Society* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, forthcoming). The growing body of published work on music in the European communities in India includes: Raymond Head, 'Corelli in Calcutta: Colonial Music-Making in India during the 17th and 18th Centuries', *Early Music*, 13 (1985), 548–53; Thomas Tolley, 'Music in the Circle of Sir William Jones: A Contribution to the History of Haydn's Early Reputation', *Music & Letters*, 73 (1992), 525–50; Richard Leppert, 'Music, Domestic Life and Cultural Chauvinism: Images of British Subjects at Home in India', in Richard Leppert and Susan McClary (eds.), *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance, and Reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 63–104; Gerry Farrell, *Indian Music and the West* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); and Ian Woodfield, 'The "Hindostannie Air": English Attempts to Understand Indian Music in the Late Eighteenth Century', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 119 (1994), 189–211.

cities of the British Empire in India, Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta, began to emerge as the regional hubs of its commercial operations. By the mid-eighteenth century, Calcutta had established a position of dominance. Not only was it the seat of British administration, exercised by the governor-general and the council; it was also the commercial centre of the region. As the principal destination of sailings from London, Calcutta provided the main point of entry for retailers, both to Bengal itself and to regions further inland in north-central India, such as the Kingdom of Oudh, which was increasingly coming under British 'protection'.

The change in political power had a dramatic impact on the spending power of a few well-placed but unscrupulous Company employees. It was soon realized that huge personal fortunes could be obtained from 'gifts' received from Indian princes anxious to establish their position with the emerging regional power. The basic unit of these bribes was the 'lakh', a few of which, at 100,000 rupees or about £10,000 each, it was worth taking the trouble to acquire. A celebrated quip about the joys of life in Bengal at this period ran: 'alas and alack-a-day!' For a while, the name of India was synonymous with the easy acquisition of great wealth, and the English 'nabobs' became figures of envy and hate in about equal measure.[2] Yet it was not the emergence of a relatively small number of major winners during this short-lived period of rapacious plunder that persuaded London music retailers to take India seriously as a market for their goods; rather it was the growth of a wider clientele, affluent rather than spectacularly wealthy.

With political responsibility came the need for an administration. There was thus a steady increase in numbers of professional Anglo-Indians, civil servants, middle-ranking army officers, surgeons, and chaplains. The scale of the increase is exemplified by the expansion in the army: in 1763 there were 114 officers, rising to 500 in 1769, with over a thousand by 1784.[3] There was a similar, if perhaps less dramatic, growth in the civilian professions. Up to this point, the Anglo-Indian population was still largely a male one.[4]

The long-term cultural and political consequences of the arrival of larger numbers of women from the British Isles have been extensively studied by historians of the Empire.[5] Changing career patterns meant that men were remaining in

[2] The standard work on the personal fortunes obtained by employees of the East India Company is P. J. Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976). See also James M. Holzman, 'The Nabobs in England: A Study of the Returned Anglo-Indian, 1760–1785' (Ph.D. diss., Columbia University, 1926).

[3] Marshall, *East Indian Fortunes*, 180.

[4] The term 'Anglo-Indian' is used here in its original sense, meaning a British person living, or having lived, in India, not a person of mixed race.

[5] See e.g. Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1980). On the place of women in Anglo-Indian society, see T. G. P. Spear, *The Nabobs: A Study of the Social Life of the English in Eighteenth-Century India* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932), and Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Subcontinent, 1765–1856* (Bombay, Calcutta, and Madras: Oxford University Press, 1978).

India for longer periods, and the option of marrying and bringing up a family there before retiring to England became an increasingly popular one. With a markedly imbalanced European population in which men outnumbered women many times over, Calcutta began to develop a reputation as a marriage market. As Peter Borsay has shown, English spa towns functioned in this way, providing a secure and genteel environment in which the unattached could safely survey the available talent.[6] The risks to health and sanity were undoubtedly far greater on board an East Indiaman than in the Pump Room, but once in India the male/female ratio was wonderfully favourable to the unmarried woman in search of a partner. The steady influx of women from the British Isles began to transform the musical life of Anglo-Indian society. Calcutta's musical profile had hitherto been an unmistakably 'male' one, with a flourishing Catch Club, a strong lobby for ancient music, and a general preference for violin and flute repertories. Once European women began to arrive in much larger numbers, newer forms of music-making quickly took hold, which were promoted in the private soirée rather than the club, and which featured a fashionable new instrument, the pianoforte, and a fashionable new genre, the accompanied sonata. The fast-changing social and musical order simply galvanized the Calcutta market for keyboard instruments. By the mid-1780s, the local press was full of advertisements for harpsichords, organs, and pianos of every conceivable kind.

Growing awareness of the new market in India is evident in some of the catalogues published by London music retailers in the 1780s and 1790s. John Bland, for example, owner of a flourishing warehouse at No. 49 Holborn, evidently thought naval officers were as significant as provincial music retailers as potential customers for bulk purchases. In his 1789 catalogue he offered a special discount: 'The greatest Allowance to Merchants, Captains of Ships, and Country Dealers, who take Quantities for Sale or Exportation.'[7] Such notices indicate that a high-volume trade in musical goods was steadily building up. The musical requirements of the average amateur Anglo-Indian flautist prior to embarkation were not great: perhaps a new instrument and a small collection of sheet music. These could be purchased easily in London and then taken to India in a modest box of belongings. Easily portable, tuneful, and amenable to the legions of would-be scrapers and blowers who signed up for service in the East, violins and flutes had long been the favoured instruments of the East India Company workforce, and suppliers of these 'male' instruments were already doing good business.

A useful source of evidence concerning the extent of musical-instrument ownership in the Anglo-Indian community during the 1760s and 1770s is the sequence of volumes in the Oriental and India Office Collections in the British Library entitled 'Bengal Inventories'. The Company listed in pedantic but

[6] Peter Borsay, *The English Urban Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 243–8.

[7] On John Bland, see Ian Woodfield, 'John Bland: London Retailer of the Music of Haydn and Mozart', *Music & Letters*, 81 (2000), 210–44.

valuable detail the belongings of its deceased employees. A broad estimate would put the overall extent of ownership of musical instruments at about 10 per cent, plus or minus 2 per cent. This perhaps rather surprisingly large figure seems to suggest that musical literacy, albeit at a very basic level, was commoner in the English male middle classes than has sometimes been supposed, although there remains the possibility that aspects of the colonial way of life, such as the need to assert European identity, could have served to augment the figures.[8] Be that as it may, impressive totals of more than 150 flutes and 90 violins were recorded in the inventories over these two decades. Only French horns, widely used as ceremonial instruments in India, approached this level. By comparison, keyboard instruments were as yet uncommon. To judge by five-year totals, the relative numbers of the most significant chamber music instruments remained fairly static:

	1765	1770	1775
Flute	45	40	45
Violin	23	32	32
Harpsichord	4	4	6
Organ	3	5	3

The ratio was thus approximately six flutes and three to four violins for every continuo instrument. This profile matches the requirements of chamber sonatas, the repertoire preferred by the serious Anglo-Indian amateur.

Because of its much greater expense, bulk, and fragility, a keyboard instrument could not be transported so simply as a flute, and it was inevitable that a specialist supply line would evolve, to cope with the formidable problems of delivery to the remoter regions of northern India. The central figure in the export of keyboard instruments was the naval officer, who acted as a middleman, making the original purchase in London, taking responsibility for the transport, and selling in the Calcutta market. The opportunity to export keyboard instruments to India depended on an entitlement to space on an East Indiaman. Captains, first, second, third, and fourth officers, and even the purser and surgeon regularly received allocations of space, proportionate to their rank. An individual's 'space' would then become his 'investment', which he could fill with whatever luxury goods were deemed most saleable. That large instruments such as double-manual harpsichords and grand pianofortes were so regularly selected, along with fashionable millinery, fine foods, and wines and spirits, shows that the presumption of profitability was sufficiently great to outweigh the risks.

A sea voyage to India via the Cape would take several months, crossing the equator twice. During the course of this journey, harpsichords and pianos were

[8] The number of male amateur musicians is generally underestimated in Richard Leppert, *Music and Image: Domesticity, Ideology and Socio-Cultural Formation in Eighteenth-Century England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988). Another sign of widespread basic musical competence among men is the large amount of easy music published in London for flute and violin, instruments rarely played by women.

vulnerable to damage. They could be smashed by the violence of storms or ruined internally by humidity and temperature changes. After at least half a century of experience, many of the pitfalls were well known, and advice on how best to protect instruments was available, even if its efficacy was questionable. Captain Thomas Williamson, a prominent self-styled expert in the growing market for handbooks of practical tips for the oriental traveller, devoted a good deal of space to the subject in his *East India Vade-Mecum*. His advice was to purchase an instrument specifically designed to cope with the rigours of life overseas: 'Those ladies who are partial to music should be particularly careful that the piano-fortes they may take with them, be constructed in such a manner as may exempt them from those wondrous effects produced by the climate of India.' Before embarkation, he advised, instruments should be 'clamped at every joint with plates of brass, and secured, in the more delicate parts, by means of battens well screwed and cemented to the sound board'.[9] He recommended the pianos of Clementi, Kirkman, and Tomkinson as being particularly appropriate for a hot climate. Manufacturers were well aware of the potential for damage to their instruments during delivery, and thought was given as to how best to protect keyboards in transit. Several firms adopted the practice of wrapping their instruments tightly in tinfoil, which, it was hoped, would provide some reassurance about condition. Advertisements in the Calcutta press made some play with the concept of 'mint' (i.e. literally unopened) instruments.

Not all harpsichords and pianos could be put away for the duration of the sea voyage. Regular access to an instrument during the journey to India was a matter of real concern to the unmarried woman wishing to maintain her level of accomplishment, as indeed it was to the genuine music lover, anxious not to be deprived of a favoured recreation for the best part of half a year. In the cramped conditions on board, only very small instruments could be placed satisfactorily in an individual cabin; any larger harpsichord or piano in active use was better located in a public space. While the gentleman amateur could scratch away on his fiddle in the privacy of his own cabin, women were obliged to practise in public. Serious friction was sometimes the result, when fellow travellers had to endure the intensive daily practice regime of a 'musician' of minimal talent, but with a single-minded determination to succeed. During his voyage to India in 1764, Robert Clive was driven practically insane by the efforts of a would-be harpsichord player, whom he waspishly described as: 'a Woman of a most Diabolical Disposition; ignorant, ill tempered, and selfish to the highest Degree [who] seem'd possess'd of every disagreeable Quality which ever belong'd to the Female Sex without being Mistress of one Virtue (chastity excepted) to throw into the opposite Scale'. Her offence was to practise 'two hum drum Tunes for four Hours every day' on the

[9] Thomas Williamson, *The East India Vade-Mecum*, 2 vols. (London: Black, Parry & Kingsbury, 1810), i. 47.

harpsichord 'without the least Variation or Improvement'.[10] The rules of etiquette meant that the other passengers had to suffer in silence.

The ever-resourceful Williamson was ready with advice on how a keyboard in use on a ship should be treated:

> Ladies will derive considerable convenience and gratification from having an exterior case made to enclose the piano-forte, leaving a space of about an inch all round. This outward safeguard should be of planed deal, stained of a mahogany color, or painted; and it should open in front, so as to admit of playing the instrument, while its lid should be fixed upon hinges, that it may be thrown back at pleasure. The lower part of the frame may be packed, and laid by; a spare frame of deal being substituted during the voyage, with a set of shelves below to contain music, books, &c all locked up by means of folding doors. Both the exterior case, and the frame, ought to be furnished with lacquered iron handles, whereby to lift them occasionally; but particularly intended to secure them to the side of the ship, and to the deck; without such a precaution the whole would be tumbled about and shivered to atoms, by the vessel's motion.[11]

The sales pitch was that specialized cases would facilitate easy access to the instrument on board, while affording some protection in really rough weather. Of course, the 'extras' recommended for sea-bound pianos merely put up the selling price.

On arrival in Calcutta, a few days would elapse before the cargo was landed, to allow the paperwork to be completed. Officers would notify by post those for whom they had specific commissions, and then an extraordinary scramble would take place, as they sought to off-load their investments. For this, a press announcement was essential, in which it was customary to identify the ship, the rank of the officers with goods for sale, the location of the auctioneer, and the details of what was on offer. The two examples shown in Table 1.1 are typical.

For artefacts such as pianos and harpsichords, a quick sale was essential because of the speed with which the product could be damaged by the climate and become unsaleable. Instruments could be offered to the public at bazaars, established auction houses, commission warehouses, any public building hired for the occasion, or in a private home. A wide range of selling techniques was deployed, including raffle, lottery, auction with or without reserve prices, and private treaty.

In the frenzy of selling that followed the arrival of a ship, consignments of instruments might change hands several times before reaching the amateur players of India. Multiple transactions steadily diminished any one seller's level of responsibility for the condition of instruments, and there is little doubt that abuses of every kind were rife. It was common, for example, for keyboard instruments to undergo a change of identity during the voyage outward. After a decade or so of vigorous trading in 'Broadwood' grand pianos in Calcutta, owners of such

[10] British Library, Oriental and India Office Collections (henceforth OIOC), Clive MSS, G37, Box 15/1.
[11] *The East India Vade-Mecum*, i. 47–8.

Table 1.1. Consignments of imported musical instruments auctioned in Calcutta, 1786

Ship	Officer	Auctioneer	Instruments
Walpole[a]	Chief Officer	Wade & Matthews	Music and Musical Instruments by Longman and Broderip: A piano forte, organized, A ditto, with three stops, A ditto with a French frame, A piano forte guitar, A plain ditto, French horns, German flutes, A large collection of New Music.
	2nd Officer	Creighton	An elegant large Piano Forte
Lansdown[b]	Captain	Ord	Musical Instruments and a Collection of New Music.
	Purser		Portable grand piano fortes, with mahogany desks.
	2nd Officer		Elegant organized piano forte, with stop, diapason and dulciana treble, Patent piano forte guittars, A handsome long three stop piano forte, Violin strings, Several books of instructions for the above.
	Officer	Burrell & Gould	Violins in cases, A quantity of strings, A large assortment of new music.

[a] *India Gazette*, 25 Sept. 1786.
[b] *India Gazette*, 16 Oct. 1786.

instruments were doubtless surprised and possibly alarmed to read the following notice, inserted in the local press by the manufacturer:

John Broadwood & Son, Grand and small piano forte makers to His Majesty and the Princesses having received authentic information that Instruments of very imperfect nature are sent out for sale to India and their name affixed as if manufactured by them think it necessary to acquaint the Gentry in India that none of the numerous Piano Fortes introduced into Asia by officers of Indiamen and others for sale within these 6 years last passed are of their manufacture. They beg to declare that none of the pianofortes that have mahogany fronts or name boards that have any painted ornaments or that have brass clamps on the

corners are of their manufacture with the exception of two Grand pianofortes with brass clamps sent out 9 years ago, and one small one sent in 1800.[12]

One is irresistibly reminded of Cyril Ehrlich's characterization of the suppliers of 'meretricious rubbish' in the nineteenth-century piano market, publicans, furniture dealers, and shady 'professors' of music, who took advantage of high profit margins to undercut reputable specialists, for which they needed only spare cash, knowledge of local demand, and access to suppliers.[13] East India captains had all three, and they enjoyed the additional security of operating in a market in which there was no recourse at all to the original manufacturer. Selling pianos in India was a money-spinner, and everyone knew it.

Discerning amateur musicians were doubtless aware of the prevalence of these practices, and some deemed it prudent to order an instrument directly from London, paying independently for its shipment to Calcutta. There was no formal bar to this course of action, although it required a good deal of organization. Robert Clive's wife Margaret received a request for assistance from a friend, who claimed to be 'distress'd beyond measure to get a Harpsichord from England, owing to the difficulties of having it brought out'.[14] She was asked to act as an intermediary with Kirkman, which entailed checking that the instrument was being constructed to the desired specification, facilitating the arrangements for payment, and then recruiting an officer willing to undertake the transport commission. In this instance, the name Clive was enough to ensure a free passage for the instrument.

External factors meant that the Calcutta market for luxury goods of all kinds operated in a cyclical fashion. To avoid the monsoon season, East India Company ships sailed at certain times of the year, and there were periods when there were few arrivals. The letters of Margaret Fowke give a good impression of the sense of anticipation and excitement that the imminent landing of a new consignment of merchandise caused.[15] Her correspondence also confirms the point made by economic historians that the growth of affluence in the Anglo-Indian community was by no means a uniformly ascending curve. Calcutta's economy went through a

[12] Quoted in David Wainwright, *Broadwood, by Appointment: A History* (London: Quiller Press, 1982), 102. The firm of Broadwood supplied the colonial market from the early years of its existence. In the 1790s, it was exporting pianos to the West Indies and to the newly independent USA. Ibid. 78.

[13] *The Piano: A History* (rev. edn., Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 43.

[14] BL, OIOC, Clive MSS, G37, Box 38.

[15] The letters of the Fowke family, Joseph, his son Francis, and his daughter Margaret, span some four decades, from *c.*1770 to *c.*1810. Joseph, a middle-ranking official in the service of the East India Company, was distantly connected to the Clive family. The Fowkes' private correspondence provides an excellent resource for the study of music in a late 18th-c. Anglo-Indian family. For details of the family see G. R. Kaye and E. H. Johnston, *India Office Library: Catalogue of Manuscripts in European Languages*, ii/2: *Minor Collections and Miscellaneous Manuscripts* (London: India Office Library, 1937). The Fowke letters are found in the Fowke and Ormathwaite series in the British Library (OIOC), and in the Powis 1990 Deposit and the Ormathwaite series in the National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth.

series of cyclical depressions, and the early 1780s in particular was a difficult period. She described the situation in a letter of 29 June 1783:

> A Portuguese ship is lately arrived with the largest and most complete cargo from England . . . it is not yet known how it will be sold. There are carriages of all kinds, books, wines, musical instruments, in short, large quantities of every thing in the world in it. But the settlement has no money. The company is so largely in arrears to all the servants, the contractors are obliged to advance money of their own to carry on business.[16]

On another occasion, she reported that Calcutta inhabitants had developed the habit of merely window-shopping.[17] There was certainly money to be made in such a market, and the odds in favour of making it were good, but success was not guaranteed.

This element of unpredictability perhaps explains why specialist music retailers found Calcutta a difficult environment in which to establish a permanent business. In the mid-1780s, years of strong demand for musical instruments, a music warehouse was opened up by a man called Stone. His business plan resembled that of any music retailer in a small provincial town in the English shires, with customers being offered a comprehensive service: the supply of musical instruments and spare parts; the opportunity to examine a wide range of music currently in print; music copying; tuning; rudimentary tuition on all the main instruments. Stone had some early success. The Fowke family welcomed the initiative and regularly patronized his shop. Within a few years, however, the newspapers were announcing that he had diversified into the one commodity certain to find buyers in India: hard liquor. It is worth remembering that Calcutta still had a European population of only a few thousand, and conditions thus favoured the general supplier rather than the specialist stockist. It was also an environment conducive to the make-a-quick-buck merchants. Although there were some well-established auction houses, the general impression given by the press is of the rapidity with which business consortia were formed and re-formed. It seems clear that many auctioneers traded for brief periods only, and then cashed in their profits before returning to Europe. For the hapless purchaser of an expensive but rapidly failing pianoforte, the likelihood was that both the officer importing the instrument and the firm auctioning it would be gone within weeks or months. In this market the advice *caveat emptor* was well taken.

For detailed evidence of how keyboard instruments were sold in India, newspaper advertisements are the best source. These reflect all the major developments in keyboard technology currently taking place in Europe. The transition between harpsichord and pianoforte, for example, is clearly evident. In the early 1790s, harpsichords were still regularly advertised, possibly because India was seen as a convenient dumping ground for the now nearly redundant instrument, but by

[16] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, E4, 143.

[17] Ibid., E4, 202: 'There is such a scarcity of money in Calcutta that the people walk around the shops and look at things as if they were there merely for shew.'

the end of the decade, they were rapidly disappearing. The most highly prized keyboard instruments in India were now grand pianos, which, by the end of the decade, were being advertised regularly in the *Calcutta Gazette*. The following is a brief selection of notices:

14 January 1796	A Grand Piano Forte, with additional keys by Ganer.
5 May 1796	A Patent Piano Forte by Broadwood.
11 August 1796	A Grand Piano Forte, with additional keys, from M. & W. Stoddart.
9 March 1797	A Grand Piano Forte, Commissioned from Stoddart, made particularly for this Country, and came out on the Nonsuch; is allowed to be a very fine instrument; and its price S[icca] R[upees] 1200. [£150]
16 March 1797	Piano Fortes, a grand one, with additional Keys, made by Broadwood and Son, with an assortment of newest Music—Price 1,000 S[icca] R[upees]. [£125]
	Two small ditto Patent, with extra Keys, made by Longman & Broderip. Price each Sicca Rupees 425 [£53. 2*s*. 6*d*.], by the Warren Hastings, unopened, packed in Tin and Copper, and presumed to be in excellent order.
8 June 1797	A Grand Piano Forte, by Stoddart. Price 1100 Sicca Rupees. [£137.10*s*.]
	Grand Piano Forte by Stoddart and Son, with Additional Keys, in High Order and in Tune, price Sicca Rupees 1500. [£187.10*s*.]
28 September 1797	A remarkably fine toned Grand Piano Forte, with additional keys and pedals, particularly secured to stand the climate of this country, built by Broadwood.

As the clientele became more sophisticated, there was an increasing tendency for advertisements to specify the makers of musical instruments. As in Europe, the value of an instrument came to depend more on the label than on any intrinsic merit. The magic name 'Stradivarius' would already add value to any violin sold in Calcutta.

Since London was the point of departure for the trade in keyboards, it is not surprising that its major manufacturers dominated the trade. The roll-call of names is impressive: Shudi; Kirkman; Longman & Broderip; Broadwood; Clementi; Stodart; Ganer. At the start of the decade, Longman & Broderip were in the ascendant, but newer manufacturers of pianofortes, such as Stodart and Broadwood, were soon challenging this position. It is relatively rare to find instruments by provincial English makers or from the Continent. In this instance, control of the supply line, or at least easier access to it, conferred on London makers a distinct advantage.

The reason there was such interest in supplying the Calcutta market is evident when the price that a large instrument could fetch is taken into consideration.

The average cost of a grand piano seems to have been in the range 1,000 to 1,300 sicca rupees (£125–£160). On one occasion, the sum of £130 was charged for a Broadwood, supplied to the 'only lady' in Canton. The instrument had been ordered for a man in India, but the ship transporting it had been redirected to China.[18] Even allowing for insurance, packing, shipping costs, and import duty, this price level represents a very large mark-up over the current rates in London. Broadwood, for example, charged £84 for its most expensive grand piano.[19] To persuade a buyer to part with what, even for an affluent nabob, was a large sum, the full range of the advertising lexicon was brought into play. On the whole, there is little to distinguish Calcutta advertisements from those in the London press. Buzzwords were 'new', 'elegant', 'handsome', 'patent', and 'capital', pointing above all to the fashionability of the product. The general absence of the local context, occasionally evident in such phrases as 'made on purpose for this country' or in offers of spare bellies, is rather telling. Almost by definition, such references drew the buyer's attention to the fragility of what was on offer.

Novelty was a very useful advertising ploy in the colonial context. Naval officers and auctioneers quickly grasped the point that Calcutta's inhabitants had an especial interest in the latest European goods. Ownership of the most up-to-date possessions seemingly provided reassurance that, although geographically remote from the Mother Country, Anglo-Indians were not socially or culturally behind the times.[20] In the keyboard market, combination instruments such as the 'capital organized harpsichord and pianoforte by Longman & Broderip' advertised in 1791 provided this aura of novelty, and they were thus very popular indeed. Some musical instruments were combined with other items of furniture, such as the 'new invented Ladies Commode, Solid Mahogany furnished in high stile, and containing a curious Piana Forte to draw out', advertised by the auctioneers Moore, Sanders, & Lacy, as part of the investment of the captain of the *Earl of Oxford* in 1786.

A potential source of competition for retailers of new keyboard instruments in India was the vigorous second-hand market. This was driven by a diverse range of factors, which included the shockingly high death rates among Anglo-Indians, the mobility of the East India Company workforce, and the rapid deterioration of the product. Since it was rather pointless to pay for the repatriation to England of an instrument in terminal decline, amateur musicians frequently placed notices of sale in the press in the weeks prior to embarkation. Further instruments came on to the market from the estates of deceased Company employees. In the 1780s, ten to fifteen keyboard instruments a year were thus advertised. The following selection appeared in 1787:

[18] Wainwright, *Broadwood, by Appointment*, 102. [19] Ibid. 103.

[20] This point is exemplified by repertoire. The music of Haydn, for example, was transmitted rapidly to India. See Ian Woodfield, 'Haydn Symphonies in Calcutta', *Music & Letters*, 75 (1994), 141–3, in response to Tolley, 'Music in the Circle of Sir William Jones'.

Gentleman going to Europe	A Piano Forte
	A very good Harpsichord
	A very good Hand Organ
	A Harpsichord
Joseph Fowke	A Remarkable fine Toned Harpsichord, Maker Kirkman
Gentleman going to Europe	A Harpsichord of an excellent construction
An officer of an Indiaman	A Hand Organ
	Large Organ
	Two Harpsichords and a spinet

Many must have been in a very poor condition indeed, and some advertisements were run for weeks on end. It is noticeable that whereas new instruments from Europe were advertised with reference to their appearance, second-hand instruments with an Indian history were advertised as being 'in good condition', 'of excellent construction', or simply as 'fine ton'd'. Everyone knew what a few years in India could do to the sound quality of instruments, and repeated reassurances on this point can have fooled few potential buyers. The 'one careful owner' syndrome provided the best sales pitch. Social snobbery could also be a useful tool. If the seller was an eminent or respected figure in Calcutta society, the name could be used as an implicit guarantee. In 1785, Warren Hastings sold his organ, and John Shore, a Council member, advertised 'a large superb key organ in perfect order' for the price of 1,000 sicca rupees. Almost certainly, the second-hand market was much larger than this survey of press announcements would imply. The Fowke correspondence demonstrates the existence of an informal market, with instruments being lent, borrowed, and given away in private transactions.

For many harpsichords and pianofortes, the arrival in Calcutta was merely a staging post in a still longer odyssey. East India Company interests inland were starting to expand, notably in the Kingdom of Oudh.[21] Strategically, Oudh was seen as a buffer state between Bengal and inland areas under the control of potentially hostile regimes. A chain of settlements grew up across the Gangetic plains and into northern India. The names of some of these cantonments, Cawnpore, Lucknow, and Patna, were to become household words in the British Empire. To supply the inland settlements, Calcutta firms organized a regular boat service, which was easily capable of delivering a keyboard instrument. Ord & Kerr claimed that they dispatched boats twice a week 'as high as Cawnpore', which was more or less at the limit of the Company's major sphere of influence in northern India.[22]

[21] On the murky British relations with the Kingdom of Oudh, see C. Collin Davies, *Warren Hastings and Oudh* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939), and Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *A Fatal Friendship: The Nawabs, the British, and the City of Lucknow* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985). On the European musical life of Lucknow and Benares, and in particular the vogue for collecting Indian melodies, see Woodfield, 'The "Hindostannie Air" '.

[22] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, D10, 13.

Paxton, Cockrell, & Delisle dispatched wine and a pianoforte in this way: 'We have this day dispatched for you in a small pulwar, a Chest of English Claret, which we hope will reach you safe—to lessen the expense, we have forwarded by the same boat a Piano Forte for Miss Vanas, who will be charged a proportionable part of the boat hire.'[23]

Well-established firms such as this one acted as a link between their inland clients and the Calcutta retail trade. Fast delivery by river could be made on a pulwar, an Indian boat capable of transporting between twelve and fifteen tons. A hircurrah or courier would usually accompany the delivery. Alternative arrangements had to be made if a lady needed to travel inland with her keyboard still accessible. This requirement could be accommodated on a budgerow, a slow, flat-bottomed craft with a small cabin aft, in which a modestly sized instrument could be placed. In view of the relative scarcity of keyboards in isolated inland settlements, a woman travelling upriver usually had no option but to take her harpsichord or pianoforte with her. The journey was, if anything, even more hazardous than the longer sea voyage. Sophia Plowden so overloaded her two boats with the cumbersome paraphernalia of the European in transit that, after striking a patch of Ganges turbulence, both began to sink. Within minutes, only the masts of one craft remained visible above the waterline. The second boat displayed signs of being about to capsize: 'the alarm! was now universal, & the confusion undescribable —chests, bottles, books, Millinery, a Harpsichord, eatables, drinkables, bundles of Cloths, all thrown together on the shore'.[24] In less fraught circumstances, Margaret Fowke practised glee singing and Corelli figured bass while travelling upstream to Benares.

On arrival at the final destination, usually close to a river, the remaining carriage requirements would be undertaken by Indian servants. There were also many requests for the removal of instruments from one house to another. Because of the speed with which instruments could become unplayable, residents in these close-knit communities seem in effect to have assigned their own individual instruments to an informal 'pool', freely borrowing and lending whichever instrument seemed to be in the best condition. When visiting in the neighbourhood, Margaret Fowke took the sensible precaution of having her piano carried from her own house:

I supped last night with Mrs Plowden, and spent the evening very agreeably. I sent for my Pianoforte there, which can be brought at any time in three minutes; this is very pleasant, for hers is not kept constantly in tune. I seldom play upon any thing else in the evenings; I have it always brought into the veranda at night on account of the coolness. My touch upon this instrument is much improved—when I am playing upon it and the sweet south wind

[23] BL, OIOC, Ormathwaite MSS, D546/11, 41.

[24] BL, OIOC, MSS F127/94. Sophia Plowden was the wife of an East India Company official. She was keenly interested in collecting, arranging, and performing Indian melodies. Her diary records numerous transcription sessions in Lucknow, and gives some fascinating glimpses into the conduct of musical encounters between Indian princes and the English residents of Lucknow.

is blowing upon me, how impatient I am in the thought that many, many days must pass before we enjoy these pleasures together.[25]

Isolation, loneliness, and boredom were the lot of many women in India, and music could provide a valuable solace. This delightful picture of piano playing on a balmy Indian evening shows why so much trouble was taken to supply musical instruments to the furthest outposts of empire. Indeed, the remoter the station, the more necessary it was to ensure the provision of an instrument.

The central problem with the Calcutta piano market was not, paradoxically, the length of the supply line, but the complete absence of any after-sales services. Williamson warned the would-be resident of India in no uncertain terms that the purchase of an instrument marked the start of an unremitting struggle to maintain it in playing order:

The climate is unfavourable to instruments of every kind, especially to pianos, and offers a most formidable bar to the indulgence of a musical ear. No persons can be more liberal in their purchases of instruments, or of select music, than the ladies of India; they often giving two hundred pounds for a good grand piano; but the incessant apprehension of warps, and cracks, is a tremendous drawback on the interest they feel in the possession of even the best of its kind. Repairs, of every sort, whether of violins, pianos, flutes &c are exorbitantly dear, and, even at Calcutta, not always practicable; either owing to dissipation, the want of some essential article, or the quantity of work in hand.[26]

Maintenance was a problem for pianoforte players anywhere, but in India the lack of competent repairers turned keyboard ownership into an expensive lottery. The regularity with which instruments suffered catastrophic failure introduced an element of complete unpredictability into musical life. Margaret Fowke's experiences of the devastating effects of climate were doubtless typical. One night in 1783, her much-prized harpsichord suddenly collapsed. As she wrote to her brother:

I have just been touching my harpsichord, and to my infinite concern find it bewitched. It was tuned yesterday, and last night it was in perfect order. This morning just as I intended rattling off my cords, I found the keys did not answer to my touch. It sounds as an old harpsichord does that has not been tuned for ten years: some of the keys have no sound; some have a dumb kind of tone. In short this charming instrument is quite ruined.[27]

It soon became clear that the wood had warped so badly that the jacks were no longer in touch with the strings:

Very heavy rains have fallen for these two days, and last night the air was so damp that as I played upon the harpsichord, you would have imagined water had been thrown over the keys. I imagine its present condition is entirely owing to the excessive damp, which has swelled the wood so much that none of the jacks will play well.

[25] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, E4, 202.
[26] *The East India Vade-Mecum*, ii. 211.
[27] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, E4, 163.

The strain that a double 8′ unison and a single 4′ placed upon the soundboards of even robustly constructed harpsichords is well documented, but the Calcutta heat and humidity must have 'finished off' innumerable instruments which might have survived for longer in more temperate climes. When the time came to sell the instrument, which had been crudely repaired by her music teacher and an Indian carpenter, Joseph Fowke advertised it with the glowing recommendation: 'A Remarkable fine Toned Harpsichord, Maker Kirkman'. It should come as no surprise to learn that the advertisement ran for several weeks.

The dilemma facing piano owners in India was a difficult one. It was generally recognized that the potential warping of the soundboard was the main threat, but preventative measures, such as attaching supports, could adversely affect an instrument's tone. Williamson recognized the problem, but he could come up with nothing more convincing than the use of heavy blankets:

> With respect to what is called 'preparing an instrument for the climate', much may certainly be done, by taking care that only the best seasoned wood is employed, and by clamping the case with metal, both within and without; but all this has little connection with the belly, or sounding-board; which cannot be much strengthened without considerably deteriorating the tone, and causing a piano to be in the first instance condemned, for want of that richness which cannot be given to one whose vibrations are obstructed. The only chance is, to keep a piano well covered with blankets during the heats, as also in very damp weather, and to uncloathe it gradually, when about to be opened for performance. By such precautions, the instrument may remain tolerably in tune, and not sustain much injury from the variations of seasons; after two or three years, the danger may be less; but it will be prudent never to relax in point of prevention, lest the instrument should suddenly fail.[28]

Not until the advent of more robustly constructed models in the nineteenth century was there any real improvement.

If damage to instruments was a constant threat, tuning was an uninterrupted nightmare. It had to be done so frequently that even if the cost of an individual session were acceptable, the cumulative expense of constant attention would quickly become prohibitive. Through no fault of their own, tuners thus offered a service that was self-evidently poor value for money. One solution was to attempt to learn to tune for oneself. Williamson advised young women pianists to take a course in tuning before setting sail:

> She ought to qualify herself to tune the instrument; which may be effected in the course of a month, or six weeks, by attention to the instructions of a regular tuner, who would feel himself well satisfied under a moderate compensation. This is a point whereon I dwell rather particularly, knowing that, even in Calcutta, Madras, or Bombay, a good tuner is not always to be had; and that, in all other situations, throughout the interior, scarce a professional person can be found. Besides, in a country whose climate deranges the most skilful

[28] *The East India Vade-Mecum*, ii. 212.

adjustment of the wires, often in a few minutes, merely by a slight exposure to heat, or to damp, the expence attendant upon such frequent tunings, as are indispensably requisite, would speedily absorb the full value of the instrument itself; the ordinary rates being a guinea for a grand-piano, and twelve shillings for a square one. Therefore, whether considered as a convenience, or as a matter of economy, too much cannot be said in recommendation of every lady's learning to tune her piano before she embarks.[29]

Such a course of action made obvious economic sense. At Indian rates, the cost of a grand piano would be matched by a hundred tuning sessions. Tuners of any kind were simply unavailable in many small interior stations. When it seemed likely that her father would be sent inland, Margaret Fowke took a hasty course of lessons in the 'unpleasing but useful' task of tuning.[30] The tuning method adopted by many Anglo-Indians was that published by Pasquali, who in effect proposed tuning by trial and error. The fifths are to be tuned 'rather flat than otherways'. If the resulting thirds are 'fine', 'what has been done may be depended on', but 'if otherways it will be best to begin afresh'.[31] The author was doubtless correct in his assumption that his amateur readership would be unfamiliar with the scientific basis of tuning. Flattening the fifths could in theory have produced equal temperament, but Pasquali is clearly anticipating an unequal temperament with a wolf fifth (a strongly dissonant interval) between A flat and E flat. Not surprisingly, this method regularly defeated Margaret Fowke. Eventually she worked out a modus operandi with her Portuguese musician in Benares: 'I tune the 5ths very tolerably, and he performs the remainder of the task.'[32]

Many young women, however, were unable to cope even with this rudimentary and unpredictable formula. They then faced a frustrating dilemma. There was strong pressure on them to use their time in India to the best advantage by improving their music to a socially useful level, yet on a grossly out-of-tune instrument this might well be unpleasant, if it was even possible. Friends of Margaret Fowke, writing from inland stations, regularly complained of the difficulties they faced. One wrote that she was rapidly losing rather than improving her musical accomplishments. She feared that on her return to England she would be 'horribly abused' by her father for having 'neglected my Musick'. But there was no one to whom she could turn: 'I have not been able to meet with any body to put my Piano Forte in order for me, and you know how soon they get out of repair from the great heat of this climate.'[33] Another in similar vein wrote from Cawnpore that she had acquired some music from Europe this year: 'but of what use is it? both my harpsichord and fortepiano are laid up with violent colds and I can get nobody to care [for] them.'[34] Some advertisements for servants in the Indian press implied that

[29] *The East India Vade-Mecum*, i. 48–9. [30] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, D10, 13.

[31] *The Art of Fingering the Harpsichord* (Edinburgh: for R. Bremner, [1760]), pl. XV. This tutor, as well as Pasquali's *Thorough-Bass Made Easy* (Edinburgh: Robert Bremner, 1757), were both popular in India.

[32] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, E4, 599. [33] Ibid., E5, 10. [34] Ibid., E7, 4.

tuning ability was the most significant element of the job specification. The following notice appeared in the *India Gazette* of 17 August 1786:

> Tuning of harpsichords
>
> Wanted by a Gentleman up the Country, a person who can keep an Harpsichord in tune and order: if he can also teach to play, or can write a good hand, he will meet with greater encouragement.

Even if the services of such a person could be obtained, the results were often disappointing. Standards of tuning among the music professionals attracted to India seem to have been abysmally low, to judge by the scathing comments of the amateurs who had to employ them.

Another very real problem for keyboard owners was the difficulty of obtaining spare strings. As these were very scarce in India, Williamson recommended taking a large supply:

> Gentlemen who perform on string instruments, should be careful to provide an ample supply of strings, firsts and fourths especially; they being not only very dear, and perhaps damaged, when procurable, but at times not procurable in any part of India, for love nor money! Reeds for oboes, clarionets, bassoons, etc. are similarly circumstanced. Nor would it be superfluous for a lady to take with her several sets of wires for her piano; they being very scarce.[35]

The Fowke family ordered a consignment of replacement strings every year directly from London. In the autumn of 1784 a much-needed box of strings was landed from the *Dutton*, but it did not contain enough. Joseph Fowke had to reprimand his son for lack of foresight: 'for the future take care to write for a sufficient quantity, that Peggy's harpsichord may not be reduced to silence'.[36] One reason for taking this course of action was that locally purchased strings were of dubious quality. Joseph, a keen violinist, darkly suspected that his suppliers in the local 'Portuguese' community—this term often implied people of mixed race—were attempting to sell him dud sets of strings, comprising virtually anything that could stretch between peg and tailpiece.

The incessant tuning of harpsichords came to be seen as a paradigm of the wider Indian experience. One amateur poet dedicated a remarkable piece on the subject to William Aldersey, a Council member. The inability of a tuner to eradicate the last 'sick semitone' is likened to the trouble a lady has in expunging a troublesome pimple from her face:

> *The Harpsichord*
>
> To William Aldersey Esq.
>
> When on the long-neglected muffled Lyre
> Dissonance vibrates from each jarring wire;

[35] *The East India Vade-Mecum*, i. 48.

[36] BL, OIOC, Fowke MSS, E6B, 80.

When ev'ry String relax'd forgets its tone,
And chords offend with jangle not their own;
The skilful artist can repair with ease
Th'harmonic order of the nobler Keys—
Potent of sound, as with critic Ear he tries
The gamut's nice gradations as they rise;
Combines, divides, restores, depresses, lifts,
From pitch to pitch from chord to discord shifts;
Sharpens the grave, the more acute corrects;
Relieves disorders, & supplies defects;
Now hears the thirds, now fifths, now fourths prevail,
As due proportions modulate the scale;
Unites the distant cliffs, & bids the sound
Of music fill & animate the whole.
Yet spite of pains, our note imperfect still
Grates on our ear, & baffles all his skill.
As some rude pimple on a Lady's face
Oft changes places, yet maintains a place;
Forc'd from the forehead, to the temple goes.
From thence dispatch'd, still rises on the nose.
So one sick semitone the gamut round,
Will shift and shift, but never quit the ground.

The remarkable part of this amusing piece of doggerel comes at the conclusion. Eventually, after much effort, the discord is eliminated, and the symbol of the entire imperial enterprise can once more give forth its harmonious sound:

And bids the Lyre of Empire thus renew'd
In concord vibrate for the gen'ral good.[37]

The keyboard instrument might thus be seen as standing for the colonial endeavour itself: problematic in its execution, but desirable in its final results. When finally tamed like the 'Lyre of Empire', India too would be able to achieve the full 'benefits' of British rule.

For almost a millennium, beginning with the clocks, singing birds, and other musical automata used as diplomatic gifts in the early Middle Ages, and continuing with the organs and virginals presented to the Mughal emperors by European missionary and trading organizations in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the keyboard instrument had been a potent symbol of the superior technological skill of the West.[38] Provided that a presentation instrument enjoyed a successful debut on the diplomatic occasion on which it was unveiled, it mattered little if it subsequently collapsed. In its new symbolic role, as an icon of the status and wealth

[37] National Library of Wales at Aberystwyth, Ormathwaite MSS, FB3/10.

[38] The early history of this subject is discussed in Ian Woodfield, 'The Keyboard Recital in Oriental Diplomacy, 1520–1620', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association*, 115 (1990), 33–62.

of the colonial community, the appearance of a harpsichord or pianoforte was still of the essence. No matter how rotten its internal state, with warped soundboard and snapped strings, it could still present to the world the desired visual image. Just as in Europe, the physical context in which it was put on display was also important. By the end of the eighteenth century, the housing stock of the colonial community was impressive, ranging from riverside bungalows with verandahs and English-style gardens to more formal grand town houses.[39] The language with which Dean Mahomet recalled one English residence, located between Benares and Patna, would have done credit to an estate agent for the Elysian fields:

> It was a fine spacious building, finished in the English style; and as it stood on a rising ground, it seemed to rear its dome in stately pride, over the aromatic plains and spicy groves that adorned the landscape below, commanding an extensive prospect of all the fertile valley along the winding Ganges flowery banks.[40]

What better location for a Broadwood!

In India there was an imperial dimension to this kind of ostentatious display of wealth, which back in England was largely a matter of the presentation of class and status. The question was not only how other Europeans would react, but what effect the evidence of an elegant lifestyle might have on influential Indians. The musical aspects of cultural interchange between Englishmen and Indians have been little studied. While East India Company officials grew to enjoy the delights of cock-fighting, tiger hunting, and nautch-dancing, regularly offered to them in a raunchy court like that at Lucknow, Indian princely visitors to European homes were sometimes treated to the decorous pleasures of an after-dinner harpsichord recital. Writing to thank Margaret Fowke for a copy of her collection of 'Hindostannie' airs, Warren Hastings recalled the part that her music had played in conveying 'to the people of Hindostan an opinion that our Meetings of Festivity were always conducted with . . . Taste and decorum'.[41] The physical surroundings in which such encounters occurred were depicted in portraits and conversation pieces of the Anglo-Indian community.[42] These images usually emphasize the themes of British power and prestige, with splendid-looking instruments in formal settings, but a few express a warmer, more humane vision of the place of European

[39] On Calcutta's early architectural development, see J. P. Losty, *Calcutta: City of Palaces* (London: The British Library, 1990).

[40] Dean Mahomet was a rare example of an Indian who travelled to Europe in the late 18th c. to live and work there. His journal makes fascinating reading. See Michael H. Fisher (ed.), *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India* (Berkeley, Calif. and London: University of California Press, 1997), 31.

[41] BL, OIOC, Ormathwaite MSS, D546/25.

[42] Among studies of paintings done for the British community in India, see Mildred Archer, *Indian Painting for the British, 1770–1880* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1955); ead., *Company Drawings in the India Office Library* (London: H. M. Stationery Office, 1972); ead., *India and British Portraiture, 1770–1825* (London: Russell Chambers, 1979). See also William Foster, 'British Artists in India, 1760 to 1820', *Walpole Society*, 19 (1930–1), 1–88; id., 'Additional Notes to British Artists in India, 1760 to 1820', *Walpole Society*, 21 (1932–3), 108–9.

culture in India.[43] A striking example is Zoffany's charming portrait of Colonel Blair with his wife and two daughters, with its relaxed treatment of an Indian girl, seemingly very much part of the family (see Pl. 1.1). The instrument being played by one of the daughters is modest in size and noticeably unaggressive in its visual presentation. It is there to be heard and enjoyed.

For a wide diversity of reasons, social, cultural, and political, as well as musical, harpsichords and pianos were much prized by colonial communities. For the retailer, Calcutta must have seemed the perfect market. The product was expensive but avidly sought after by a wealthy clientele, yet it was liable to collapse for reasons demonstrably outside the control of either manufacturer or supplier. The overall volume of the colonial trade at this period should not be exaggerated; probably no more than several score of instruments a year were exported on East India Company ships, only a small proportion of the overall London piano market, which was expanding fast.[44] But it was a harbinger of things to come. In time, the

[43] Leppert, 'Music, Domestic Life and Cultural Chauvinism'.

[44] Broadwood, the leading firm, reached the number 1000 in its grand piano series in 1796. Wainwright, *Broadwood, by Appointment*, 328.

overseas market contributed to the position of dominance established by London keyboard manufacturers. At the height of the British Empire in 1890, the firm of Broadwood, long since overtaken by other manufacturers, could still report that its trade with India was 'very large'.[45] In the end, the experience gained in supplying early colonial markets like Calcutta was an important factor in the development of piano retail into the first worldwide music business.

[45] Ibid. 207.