William’s early life in Hanover had not been easy. Despite Isaac’s absences for military service, he succeeded in fathering ten children; of the ten, four sons and two daughters survived into adulthood.\(^1\) Isaac was a poorly paid bandsman in the Hanoverian Guards; but he did what he could to supplement the basic education offered his children by the Garrison School, which consisted of reading, writing, and religious knowledge to the age of fourteen for both boys and girls, and for the boys, arithmetic. William later recorded how “my father’s great attachment to Music determined him to endeavour to make all his sons complete Musicians.” As soon as the boys were old enough to hold a miniature violin, their lessons would begin.

Isaac, Anna, and the Founding of the Herschel Dynasty

Isaac himself was born in 1707, the youngest son of Abraham Herschel, a gardener who worked on an estate near Magdeburg, midway between Berlin and Hanover. Abraham was a remarkable man, for he “was very fond of the art of arithmetic and writing as well as of drawing and music,” and when he returned home after a hard day’s manual work he would wash his hands, eat his supper, and then stretch his mind with pen and paper. Unfortunately Abraham died when Isaac was only eleven, and his widow could not afford to put her son through the usual apprenticeship as a gardener. But the resourceful boy taught himself the rudiments of gardening and eventually got a job tending the garden of an aristocratic widow. Yet he found himself irresistibly drawn to music. As a lad he had managed to buy a violin, and he had taught himself to play by ear. Now he used his wages to purchase an oboe and to pay for proper lessons.

When he was twenty-one, Isaac took his courage in both hands, quit his gardening job, and set off for Berlin to find a post as oboist, only to
decide that what he was offered was “very bad and slavish.” Impressed by
the young man’s dedication, his surviving brother and their sister paid for
him to have a year’s musical tuition with an elderly Prussian band conduc-
tor. Eventually we find him in Brunswick, again looking for a post as obo-
ist—and again declining what he was offered, this time because it was “too
Prussian.” Isaac next traveled to Hanover, where the elector—who was also
King of Britain—maintained a corps of Guards with its own band. This
time Isaac found the terms acceptable, and on August 7, 1731, he at last
became a professional musician.

Isaac was a young man far from home. Hanover was a prosperous city
whose houses employed servant girls from the surrounding countryside,
and among them was Anna Ilse Moritzen, the illiterate eighteen-year-old
daughter of a baker. For the first time in her life she was free from family
constraints. She met the lonely bandsman, they went to bed, and con-
ceived a daughter. Normally weddings took place in the bride’s village and
were accompanied by great festivities, but Anna’s pregnancy made this im-
possible. Instead they were married quietly on October 12, 1732, in the
Garrison Church in Hanover. Six months later, on April 12, 1833, Sophia
was born.

Thus was founded the great Herschel dynasty. No fewer than ten of
their immediate descendants would be at one time or another in the ser-
vice of King George III or his consort, Queen Charlotte: their sons Jacob,
Alexander, and Dietrich would be members of the elector’s court orchestra
in Hanover; Sophia’s five sons would form the core of Queen Charlotte’s
band at Windsor Castle; while William, and later Caroline, would become
salaried astronomers to the Court at Windsor. And William’s son John
would be awarded the hereditary title of baronet by Queen Victoria for his
services to astronomy, and when he died he would be buried in Westmin-
ster Abbey, next to Newton. As an educator of children, Isaac was without
peer.

Trials and Tribulations of an Army Bandsman

In times of peace the routine of a bandsman in the Guards had much to
commend it—minimal duties and maximal family life. By 1741 Sophia
had three brothers—Jacob, William, and Johann Heinrich, who was to die
young—and a sister, Anna Christina, who would also die in childhood.
But now the War of the Austrian Succession was raging, and in wartime
the bandsmen would go on campaign along with the fighting soldiers, separated from their families and enduring hardships and privation. That September the Guards marched out of Hanover, only to return six weeks later. The following September they marched again, and in June 1743 they fought in the Battle of Dettingen. Although the Hanoverians were victorious, Isaac and his comrades spent the following night in a waterlogged field. For a time Isaac lost the use of his limbs, and his health would never recover. After his convalescence he was granted a spell of home leave, during which the fertile Anna conceived Alexander.

In February 1746 the Guards returned home. Isaac had had his fill of army life, and he applied for “dismission” (discharge). But how was he to earn his living? There were churches aplenty in Hanover, but he was no organist. The court orchestra offered prestige and affluence and entry into the higher echelons of society, but vacancies were rare, and in any case a humble gardener-turned-bandsman could hardly aim so high. And so when winter came Isaac decided to transfer his family to the great port of Hamburg, where surely there would be demand for musicians.

The journey was difficult—Alexander was just one year old, his milk bottle was frozen, and the vigor of his complaints would live in the memory of those who had to endure them—and on arrival Hamburg proved to be populated by philistines unconcerned about music. While Isaac pondered what to do next, he chanced to meet a former pupil, General Georg August von Wangenheim, no less. The general made Isaac an offer he could not refuse. The prospects of peace were good, the general said, and if Isaac returned to Hanover he could rejoin the Guards band, confident that he could live at home in peace for many years to come. Not only that, but Isaac’s talented eldest son, Jacob, could join his father in the band, and William might do the same when he attained the age of fourteen, the age when a schoolchild would be confirmed and go out into the world.

And so the Herschels returned to Hanover. Isaac rejoined the Guards, Jacob marched in the band alongside his father, and they and their comrades were able to live at home in peace and contentment. In May 1753 William, now aged fourteen, was auditioned on the oboe and violin by General Sommerfeld, and so a third Herschel joined the band. Isaac, despite his continuing health problems, was enjoying the happiest time of his life. He could supervise his three sons as they developed their talents as musicians, and the wages earned by Jacob and William could be used
to further their general education: lessons in French for both, and for the enquiring William an introduction to logic, ethics, and metaphysics. Isaac was an exemplary father.

But soon war clouds began to gather once more. The French were, as ever, on the march, and in the spring of 1756 the Hanoverian Guards were summoned to England by the current Elector of Hanover to reinforce the realm he ruled as King George II. This early move in what we know as the Seven Years’ War proved to be a false alarm, but William took the opportunity to learn some English. He saved up enough pennies to buy John Locke’s great three-volume treatise, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, but what his fellow bandsmen thought of this pretentious acquisition, we are not told. Both boys made friends among the musical community of London and the surrounding area, and this would one day stand them in good stead.

Jacob had long since decided that the army was not for him, and such were his musical talents that he had been assured that a post in the court orchestra would be his just as soon as formal approval reached Hanover from the elector’s entourage in London. To his chagrin, the required letter had still not arrived when the Guards—with Jacob resentfully among them—left for England. When the letter did arrive Jacob was in England and so unavailable, and the post went to another candidate. But at least he now succeeded in securing his dismission from the army. Comfort was always near the top of his priorities, and in the autumn he returned home by ship and coach, followed in January by Isaac and William, who had to march across Germany with their regiment while the bandsmen did their best to lift the spirits of the troops.

**Defeat at Hastenbeck**

Before long, sadly, the French were once again on the warpath, and this time the threat was real and against Hanover itself. In July 1757 the Hanoverian Guards were defeated at Hastenbeck, some twenty-odd miles from Hanover. As musicians, Isaac and William were entitled to take cover when shooting began. If we are to believe what William told his son in later life, while the battle raged, “with balls flying over his head he walked behind a hedge spouting speeches, rhetoric then being his favourite study.”

In the chaotic aftermath of Hastenbeck, Isaac persuaded himself that
because William was a boy and not under oath, he was free to quit the field of battle, and so Isaac discreetly sent him home to Hanover, where Jacob was lying low. But William found that the burghers of Hanover were desperately trying to raise a makeshift force to defend the city against the French, and all able-bodied men were being pressed into service. Suddenly civilian life lost its attraction: back in the army, as a bandsman, William was accepted by both sides as a noncombatant. So he borrowed a civilian greatcoat from the family’s landlord, and wearing it, slipped out of the city, followed at a discreet distance by his mother carrying a bundle containing his uniform. Once outside the ring of pickets, he changed into uniform and bade Anna farewell. Before long he was back with the band, relieved to find that his absence had not been noticed.

Isaac was far from pleased at the reappearance of his son, whom he had supposed to be out of harm’s way. The following weeks of retreat and confusion were arduous and fraught for soldiers and bandsmen alike, and finally Isaac uttered to William in German the equivalent of “Why don’t you get the hell out of here?” England offered sanctuary, and a musician could earn a living in any land. So Isaac dispatched him to the port of Hamburg, there to await the arrival of Jacob, to whom Isaac somehow got word of his plan for the two boys’ removal to safety. Their travel he paid for by borrowing to the limit from one of his pupils; but on arrival in England the boys would have to fend for themselves.

William had managed to get word to his mother asking her to forward his possessions to Hamburg, including some celestial globes he had made himself. But the illiterate woman had little patience with such trinkets; she instead gave them to Caroline and her baby brother, Dietrich, as playthings, and before long they were in pieces.

William the Refugee Deserter

The boys arrived penniless—William had a single French crown piece in his pocket—and for two years they survived in and around London by copying music and getting whatever teaching and performing engagements they could. Matters were not helped by the talented Jacob’s absolute refusal to play second fiddle: if he was asked to be part of a band, he must be the first violin, failing which he would decline to accept such “degradation,” even if it meant going hungry. At last, in the autumn of 1759, the
French were expelled from Hanover, and Jacob returned home. But he traveled alone: William was formally a deserter (Isaac had been arrested briefly for conniving at his escape) and had no wish whatever to be compelled to rejoin the army.¹

But London was overstocked with musicians, and so when early the following year William was invited to take charge of a small military band in the north of England, he accepted with alacrity. He had given Jacob every penny he could spare to help pay for his brother's travel home, but he made himself solvent again by walking the lengthy journey to Richmond in Yorkshire and pocketing his traveling expenses.

The post with the band was part-time, but it gave William a secure base from which to branch out as teacher, performer, and especially composer of music (figure 2). It was as a composer that he hoped one day to be remembered, and in his methodical fashion he was soon turning out symphonies at the rate of half a dozen a year.² He also began to write Jacob formal “letters” on philosophy and music and suchlike. He hoped that one day these minitreatises would be published. They are priggish and pretentious, but they reveal an original mind restless under the constraints of the daily round of the itinerant musician.

In the Garrison School back in Hanover, William had been an able pupil who helped the master by supervising the lessons of the younger children. At home, Isaac had done all in his power to further his sons’ education. Although he never had money to spare for books, Isaac somehow managed to teach himself something of the ideas of the great mathematicians, and he encouraged his sons to see these ideas, not as received wisdom but as claims to be debated. Caroline recorded:

But generally their conversation would branch out on Philosophical subjects, when my brother Wm and his Father often were arguing with such warmth and my Mother’s interference became necessary when the names Leibnitz, Newton and Euler sounded rather too loud for the repose of her little ones; who ought to be in school by seven in the morning. But it seems that on the brothers’ retiring to their own room, where they partook of one bed, my brother Wm still had a great deal to say; and frequently it happened that when he stopt for an assent or reply; he found his hearer had gone to sleep, and I suppose it was not till then that he bethought himself to do the same.
Figure 2. Although William wrote numerous symphonies and concertos while in the north of England, the only substantial musical composition he published in his lifetime was this set of six sonatas for harpsichord with optional violin and cello accompaniment, which date from his early years in Bath. The violin and cello parts are slight and contribute little, but the harpsichord part calls for a level of virtuosity and is designed for an instrument with a swell mechanism. William describes the sonatas as “Lessons for Scholars” (RAS W.7/11, 17), but if so he was blessed with talented pupils.
In Sunderland William at last had time to indulge his fascination for mathematics. As a musician he was intrigued by the arithmetic underlying musical harmony, and so he bought a copy of Harmonics by the Cambridge professor Robert Smith. He liked it so well that in the early 1770s, when he came across Smith’s other work, the two-volume Opticks, he decided to buy that too, with momentous consequences for the history of astronomy.

But this was for the future, and meanwhile he had a living to earn. Early in 1761 he heard of a vacancy that could bring him both prestige and money: that of manager of the concerts in the Scottish capital city of Edinburgh. The incumbent, he was told, intended to resign. William journeyed north and was delighted to be introduced to the great philosopher David Hume. A few days later he was invited to lead a local band in concerts that included some of his own music.

Mr. Hume, who patronised my performance, asked me to dine with him and accepting of his invitation I met a considerable company, all of whom were pleased to express their approbation of my musical talents.

He returned south confident that the post was his, and so he resigned from the military band.

Alas, the manager in Edinburgh changed his mind, and now William was without the security of the regular source of income he had enjoyed until now. He was sure he could make a living from his freelance work, but, as he told Jacob, “a certain anxiety attends a vagrant life. I do daily meet with vexations and trouble and live only by hope.” He was constantly journeying on horseback in all weather. If it was a sunny day, he would pass the time by reading a book while the horse made its own way forward. On one occasion the horse took exception to something and reared up, after which William found himself on the ground facing the horse, with the book still in his hand. But in winter he would have to brave the elements:

I will only say that at 9 o’clock, when I had still about 20 miles to ride, I was caught in an unusually heavy thunderstorm, which continued accompanied by torrents of rain, with unbroken fury, for three hours, and threatened me with sudden death. The distance from an habitation, the darkness and loneliness, obliged me nevertheless to ride on. I pursued my way therefore with unshaken sang-froid although I was often obliged to shut my eyes on account of
chapter 1: 1707–1773

the blinding lightening. At last the flashes all around me were so terrifying that my horse refused to go on; luckily at this moment I found myself near a house, into which, after much knocking, I was admitted. This morning, at 3 o’clock, I proceeded on my journey and arrived safely at this place.  

Things got so bad that on one occasion he confessed to Jacob,

I have for some time been thinking of leaving off professing Musick and the first opportunity that offers I shall really do so. It is very well, in your way, when one has a fixed Salary, but to take so much for a Concert, so much for teaching, and so much for a Benefit is what I do not like at all.

In the spring of 1762 came the breakthrough. William took part in a concert in Leeds at which one of his own symphonies was played to considerable acclaim, and five days later there was another concert during which the audience insisted that William and a visiting violinist play the same piece in head-to-head competition. So impressed with William were the burghers of Leeds that in no time at all he found himself appointed the director of concerts.

Entries in the *Leedes Intelligencer* record the ups and downs of musical life in the town. As elsewhere, musical events were either organized by the director and funded from the sale of tickets for the entire series (in which case the quality of what could be offered would depend upon the number of subscriptions taken up), or “benefit” concerts privately promoted in the hope of making a profit—an inevitable source of rivalry among musicians of the town. William figures constantly in the *Intelligencer*, as performer and/or composer, and of course as director of concerts. For example, on April 12, 1763, the *Intelligencer* announced:

Mr Herschel

Takes this Opportunity of returning Thanks to his Friends for the great and many Favours he has met with, since he came to Leedes, and is particularly oblig’d to them for their kind Approbation of his Conduct at the Subscription Concert.

He hopes to have the Continuance of their Kindness and flatters himself that those superior connoisseurs who have discovered any imperfections in the Musical Part of the Concert will easily excuse
them when they reflect on the Cheapness of the Terms and Number of the Concerts; at the same Time believes that those Imperfections might easily be remedied another Season, by some small alteration in the Proposals.

He also takes the Liberty of acquainting them, that he intends to teach the Harpsichord, the Guitar, and the Violin, to the best of his capacity, and on the most reasonable Terms.

This declaration was repeated the following week, which provoked William’s chief rival, a Mr. J. Crompton, to make a riposte. Readers, he said, should not interpret William’s offer of lessons to imply that he, Crompton, had given up teaching. To the contrary; and his pupils did not need to send to London for instruments and musical scores, for he himself kept a stock of these for their use. Not only that, but he had harpsichords, spinets, guitars, and English harps for sale, “as good as new.”

In March 1762 Jacob, a member of the Hanoverian Court Orchestra, used his considerable influence to secure his brother’s formal dismission from the Hanoverian Guards. The printed document (figure 3) pays the standard tribute to soldiers and bandsmen seeking honorable discharge: William had “borne himself on all warlike occasions, marches and guards right manfully as becomes a good hautboist.” He was no longer a deserter; but his period in the shadows would always embarrass him, so much so that when in later life he was asked about the circumstances of his arrival in England he would be “economical with the truth,” as the saying goes. However, he was now free to visit Hanover, and in 1764 he arranged a visit to reassure his anxious father as to his prospects in England. Indeed, Isaac, who was in failing health, cherished hopes of persuading his son to return home.

William’s Visit to Hanover

On April 1, 1764, the day before William (plate 1) arrived, there was an eclipse of the sun. William observed it from his coach as it crossed Lüneburg Heath. In Hanover, Isaac gathered his family around a water butt in a courtyard so that they could safely view the sun in the reflection, while he explained how such an eclipse occurs.

At noon the following day, William reached home, putting his family
into what Caroline described as “a Tumult of joy.” Before long a young gentleman arrived pretending to have come for a lesson with Isaac, but he was soon unmasked as William’s brother Alexander, who had been eleven years old when they had last seen each other, during William’s clandestine return home in the aftermath of the Battle of Hastenbeck.

The intervening years had not been kind to Alexander. Isaac had been interned along with the rest of the Hanoverian troops, and so he had been unable to give his young son the musical instruction essential for his future career. With many misgivings, Isaac had agreed to Alexander’s leaving school at the age of only twelve, and becoming a musical apprentice to Heinrich Griesbach, the husband of Isaac’s eldest daughter, Sophia. Heinrich came from a medical family of distinction, and Sophia had married above her station (the Herschels managed to pay for the requisite wedding entertainment only when the boys drew their army pay in advance) but Heinrich was the black sheep of his family and had been a humble fellow bandsman of Isaac’s in the Hanoverian Guards. Somehow he had escaped internment, and through family influence he had been appointed town musician in a small town outside Hanover. There Heinrich was paid, believe it or not, in corn, and he supplemented this income by playing at
functions in the surrounding villages and by making snuff. He was also expected to take apprentices, and Alexander was the first of these.

Apprentices were traditionally treated as slave labor, but there seems to have been an element of vindictiveness in Heinrich’s treatment of Alexander. Caroline was to see this as the reason for the difficult personality her brother displayed in adult life. Off duty, Alexander was very popular with the girls of the village and also with the landlord of the local inn, where one might find

young men smoking tobacco and the daughters, maids and neighbouring young women assembled with their spinning wheels as busy spinning as possible, while the young men tried to keep pace with their pipes and some one or other telling stories.

Alexander’s apprenticeship came to an end early in 1764 and he returned to Hanover, but the Herschels were living in cramped accommodation, and it was arranged for Alexander to board with the city musician. In return he “had little else to do but to give a daily Lesson to an Apprentis and to blow an Coral from the Mrkt Turm,” and he had just blown the chorale when William arrived home.

Most unfortunately for Caroline, William—her favorite brother, whom she had not seen since she was a child—had chosen to visit Hanover in the very Lent when she became fourteen years of age and so was due to be confirmed. What with the instruction in preparation for her Confirmation and First Communion, and the household chores that her heartless mother insisted she do, she saw very little of William. And her brother’s visit ended on a melancholy note: it had become clear that William was committed to England, and Isaac realized that he was seeing his son for the last time.

Caroline was confirmed in the Garrison Church on Sunday, April 8, and her First Communion was scheduled for the following Sunday, the very day William was to depart. Caroline took her leave of her brother at 8 o’clock and set off for church in a black silk dress and carrying a bouquet of artificial flowers—the flowers that Sophia had carried at her wedding nine years earlier. At 11 o’clock, when the service was about to begin, the Postwagen carrying William away passed the open church door, and the postilion chose that moment to give “a smettering blast” on his horn. “Its effect on my chattered nerves,” she recalled when she was in her nineties, “I will not attempt to describe.”
A Turn for the Better

Back in Leeds, William resumed his musical duties. His records of this period are fragmentary, but the *Leedes Intelligencer* allows us to track his fluctuating fortunes. In the winter of 1764–65, for example, the number of those who took up a subscription to the concerts was so small that they had to be cancelled, for the income “would not have been sufficient for him to entertain the Company in so genteel a Manner as he could have wished to have done.”

Even when the concerts were in full swing, the industrious William made time for innumerable engagements elsewhere. Early in 1766 we find him spending two or three days a fortnight at Wheatley, the country seat of Sir Bryan Cook, who was an enthusiastic violinist and whose wife played the guitar. Some of Cook’s relations would come over from Doncaster for morning concerts. All this was good for William but less good for his horse. “Having this time spent a whole week at Wheatly, my mare, standing idly in the stable, and being overfed by Sir Bryan’s grooms died.” He was at Wheatley on February 19, when his handwritten memoranda of the various places where he had engagements are interrupted by the entry “Wheatley. Observation of Venus.” Five days later he is in Kirby: “Eclipse of the moon at 7 o’Clock A.M.” But it would be years before astronomy featured again in his memoranda.

In March 1766 William moved his base to the town of Halifax, some sixteen miles from Leeds. There was to be a new organ built in the parish church, and in anticipation of the opening festivities, Joah Bates, the musically gifted son of the clerk of the parish church, was planning a performance of Handel’s *Messiah*. The singers were to meet every second Friday for rehearsals, with William leading the orchestra; Joah Bates played the chamber organ and his brother the cello. William had designs on the post of organist, and the support of the Bates family would be crucial to his success. He took every opportunity to practice on other organs, and during the summer holidays in July, he deputized for the organists in both Leeds and Halifax while they were away.

Construction of the organ was opposed in the courts by many locals, who considered it a “heathenish thing,” but the dispute was settled at last, and on August 19 the *Leedes Intelligencer* was able to announce: “An organist is wanted. Any Person who is inclined to offer himself as Candidate, may apply for further Particulars, to the rev. Mr. Bates at Halifax.”
On August 27 the final rehearsal of *Messiah* took place. The oratorio was performed on the twenty-eighth and again on the twenty-ninth, and the competition for the post of organist took place on the thirtieth. William’s allies, the Bates family, were in the church to offer their support, but William left nothing to chance. The instrument had no pedals, and so he used the trick of placing lead weights on lower keys so as to augment the harmony. The novelist Robert Southey tells the story. The seven candidates drew lots to decide the order in which they would perform. William was to play third, after Mr. Wrainwright of Manchester,

whose finger was so rapid that old Snetzler, the organ-builder, ran about the church, exclaiming: “Te Tevel, te Tevel! he run over te keys like one cat; he vill not give my piphes room for to shpeak!”

Meanwhile a friend of Herschel’s was standing with him in the middle aisle.

“What chance have you”, said I, “to follow this man?” He replied, “I don’t know; I am sure fingers will not do”. On which he ascended the organ-loft and produced from the organ so uncommon a fulness,—such a volume of slow, solemn harmony, that I could by no means account for the effect.

After this short extempore effusion, he finished with the old hundredth psalm-tune, which he played much better than his opponent.

“Aye, Aye!” cried old Snetzler, “tish is very goot, very goot indeed; I will luf tish man for he gives my piphes room for to shpeak.”

Out of a field of seven candidates, the *Intelligencer* could report that “Mr. Herschel was unanimously elected Organist of the said Church. That Gentleman’s great merit was abundantly evident from the important part he undertook, and so well performed, in the Oratorio.” William had played his cards well.

He was no doubt in euphoric mood at the time of the audition, because the previous day a letter had arrived from a Mrs. Julia De Chair in Bath, inviting him to accept the nomination for the post of organist in a chapel under construction there. So fashionable had Bath become that during the winter season the parish churches were unable to cope with the influx of aristocratic visitors, and private-enterprise chapels were being built where—for a fee—worshippers could pray without having to rub shoulders with the lower orders. The Rev. Dr. John De Chair had
joined a banker friend in constructing what was to be called the Octagon Chapel, in Milsom Street. The central octagon was to be enclosed within a rectangle, and in the corners of the rectangle were to be fireplaces for the benefit of invalids. Snetzler had contracted to build the organ, and De Chair would conduct the services.  

How the De Chairs had come to hear of William is a mystery, but the fact that it was Mrs. De Chair who wrote must imply that she had met him somewhere. At all events, William—after suitable negotiations, no doubt over his stipend—was delighted to accept the chance to establish himself in Bath. For musicians there, the busy winter season offered rich pickings, second only to those of the metropolis itself. Declining offers of an increase of salary at Halifax, he played the organ there for thirteen weeks, pocketed the thirteen guineas, and then departed for pastures new.

William Reaches the Promised Land

He arrived in Bath on December 9, 1766, and took rooms with a family called Harper. Their daughter Elizabeth was an attractive girl who sang as she sewed, and the resourceful William invented an excuse to spend time in her company by offering to give her lessons. To no avail, for “on disclosing his passion, he received no encouragement.”

It was important for William to announce his arrival on the Bath musical scene, and this he did on New Year’s Day by promoting a private-enterprise “benefit” concert. Not many turned out in the depths of winter to hear this unknown artist, but those who did must have been mightily impressed when William played his own compositions on three different instruments: violin, oboe, and harpsichord. A couple of days later he set off on horseback for Leeds and Halifax to wind up his affairs there, and during his absence he advertised in the *Bath Chronicle* offering lessons in a whole range of musical instruments as well as in singing.

Such was the response that he quickly outgrew the Harper home. He decided to take a house of his own in Beauford Square, but he would need help to run it. In Leeds he had rented rooms with the Bulman family. But Mr. Bulman’s business had failed and he was now out of work. By a stroke of good luck, De Chair and his partner were looking for a clerk to manage the finances of their chapel and to make sure the building was clean and warm. William successfully proposed Bulman for the job, and so the
Bulmans moved to Bath, where they were reunited with William in an arrangement that was to last for seven years.

Three weeks after his benefit concert, William was invited to join the band that played in the Assembly Room, Pump Room, and Baths. This would provide him with a second regular salary, to which would be added his income from freelance performing and teaching; but William already felt confident enough to decline what he saw as the subordinate post of a rank-and-file musician. It was then explained to him that no less a person than Thomas Linley, Sr., played in the band and that if William on occasion had a more lucrative offer to play elsewhere, he might send a deputy in his place. At this he accepted.

The occasions could be quite splendid. One delighted participant found the most brilliant Assembly my Eyes ever beheld. The Elegance of the room, illuminated with 480 wax Candles, the prismatic colours of the Lustres, the blaze of Jewels, and the inconceivable Harmony of near 40 Musicians, some of whom are the finest hands on Europe, added to the rich attire of about 800 Gentlemen and Ladies, was, altogether, a scene of which no person who never saw it can form any adequate Idea—It began at half past 6 and ended at 10.

In February William, frustrated at being an organist with no organ, wrote to Snetzler urging him “to hasten the work.” At long last, on June 29, installation began. Jacob had arrived from Hanover a few days before, but Bath was out of season, and he soon took himself off to a country estate where he was to perform and teach music until the autumn. The official opening of the Octagon Chapel took place on August 4, and by that time William was engaging singers and performers for the inauguration of the organ, which was to follow in October. William was a man comfortable with all sections of society, and for his choir he enlisted “young workmen, carpenters and joiners, who had no previous notion of singing, but who, under his stimulating tuition, were soon able to render the choruses of various oratorios with success.” For the opening on October 18 the oratorio, needless to say, was Handel’s Messiah. William directed the performance, whose proceeds were for “the relief of the industrious poor,” and Jacob played the organ. Between the second and third parts William himself performed an organ concerto, and as if all this were not enough for
one day, in the evening he mounted a benefit concert on his own account, no doubt employing the singers he had brought to Bath for Messiah. And the next day Messiah was performed in the chapel for a second time, again for the industrious poor.

Until the arrival of William on the scene, Linley and his talented family had dominated musical life in Bath. In season, the spa town offered unlimited opportunities for the professional musician, but it was a cockpit of rivalries and became still more so in 1771, when the New Assembly Rooms were opened in competition with the existing rooms. Each year the season lasted from the autumn until Easter, and the musicians had to earn enough money in this period to last them a twelvemonth. William would teach for as much as forty-six hours in a single week. He also took part in lucrative private performances: in the winter of 1775–76, for example, the Marchioness of Lothian organized twenty successive Saturday evening parties, in her own house and in those of friends, at which William and a group of his pupils would perform. In addition there were benefit concerts (although these might prove a financial disaster if there were rival musical offerings that same evening), oratorios in the run-up to Easter, and concerts with the band, and meanwhile the choir of the Octagon Chapel had to be kept supplied with music and trained to perform it. And the sizeable—if less fashionable—seaport of Bristol was only a few miles away, and a concert given in Bath might be repeated next day in Bristol. Life in the season was frantic, and it is no wonder that tempers became frayed.

The opening of the New Assembly Rooms eventually led William to provoke a squabble that was a true tempest in a teapot. William might reasonably have hoped to be appointed director of music in the new rooms, but it was his rival Linley who was so honored, and—to rub salt in the wound—William was merely to be one of the extra musicians needed on a Wednesday. One evening in January 1772 William found that Linley had failed to ensure that he had a stand on which to rest his music, and so he had no option but to place his music on the floor. William was outraged at what he saw as a public insult to the dignity of one of the city’s premier musicians. When this happened a second time he lost all sense of proportion, walked out, and took an advertisement in the Bath Chronicle berating Linley for the “ungenteel treatment.” Linley then took an advertisement ironically accepting that William’s lack of a desk “must violently agitate the tender Sensibility of his Frame.” In reply William informed the Chronicle’s...
readers that the “sensibility of Mr. Linley’s Frame” was evidently not “tender enough to perceive the real Offence there is in leaving any Gentleman of the Band two successive Night’s without a Desk.” Before long, Linley was characterizing William as a man of “mean and contemptible Disposition,” and was glad to inform him of “how very sincerely he despised him,” comments that William ascribed to “that bitterness of Temper which is the general Attendant on low Cunning and dark Envy, when they are drawn out of their lurking Place and exposed to Public View.” Calm, and a much-needed sense of proportion, returned with the end of the season.

Alexander in Bath

By this time Alexander had come to Bath and was lodging with William. Alexander’s musical career had progressed since William’s visit to Hanover in 1764. In the winter of 1765–66, he became first oboist in the regimental band of Prince Charles, who was a pupil of Jacob Herschel’s and a brother-in-law to King George III. Alexander was thus well placed to secure one of the coveted vacancies in the Hanoverian Court Orchestra, for “Prins Carl being at Hannover, it was known that all vacancies would be filled with men from his favorit Band.” Unfortunately, when the vacancy occurred Alexander was one of two equally favored candidates, and each had to agree to work for half salary. Caroline later commented: “This my Father foresaw would involve us in great difficulty, for he had early discovered (and not been sparing in admonishing) that Alex. was no economist and addicted to expensive pleasures.”

In 1767 Isaac at last succumbed to the ill health that had plagued him since his early years of campaigning with the Guards. Jacob, the new head of the family, and hiswidowed mother now had to face life without Isaac. “About Alexander we had no fear that he would by practising a strict economy, and attending some of his late Father’s Scholars, and others, do well enough till by an increase in salary his situation would become more easy.”

Jacob, drawn to the rich pickings available in Bath to musicians of talent, now decided to pay William an extended visit, and this left Alexander unsupervised. Caroline, as she tells us,

was extremely discomposed at seeing Alex, associating with young men who led him into all manner of expensive pleasures, which involved him in debts for the hire of Horses, and Carioles &c. and I
was (though he knew my inability of helping him) made a partaker in his fears that these scrapes should come to the knowledge of our Mother.

It was at this stage that Alexander began to display hints of the exceptional mechanical talent that he shared with William.

My Mother Span, I was at work on a set of ruffles of dresden work for my brother Jacob, and Alex oftens sat by us and amused us and himself with making all sorts of things in pasteboard, or contriving to make a 12 hours Kuku Clock go a Week.

Jacob returned in July 1769 well pleased with his time in Bath, and a year later he was off again, this time with Alexander, who had been given two years’ leave of absence from the court orchestra. Alexander was to stay in Bath not two, but forty-six, years. He quickly became a member of the band at the Orchard Street Theatre and performed there for most of his long residence in the town. Like his three brothers, Alexander had the ability to play any instrument he laid his hands on: a violinist and oboist in Hanover, in Bath he was known first as a clarinetist, and then as a cellist whose solos Caroline declares were “divine.” But he was notorious for his insistence on strict tempo. He

was a true German; being a strict timist, but scouting the more delicate refinements of Italy; in consequence of which, whenever Tenducci sang at any concert in Bath, he and Herschel were always sparring, as whenever the former wished to lengthen a note, or vary a little from the strict time, when the expression of the sentiment seemed to require it, which he used to signify to the band with a motion of his hand, Herschel would always keep on without varying an iota but keeping rigidly to the time, saying there was no pause or adagio marked. 27

Alexander’s talent for contriving gadgets was truly remarkable. In the years to come he would make William a clock that kept excellent time and another specially devised to help Caroline in her astronomical observations; and he even taught himself to become a brass worker to a professional standard. He was to be the third—but unsung—member of the Herschel astronomical team.
Caroline in Bath

William had all but forgotten his squabble with Linley by the time he arrived back from Hanover on August 27, 1772, with Caroline in tow. It was not until the afternoon of the following day that his sister awoke from her sleep of exhaustion and found herself in Bath. Early the next morning it was down to business. Even before breakfast was finished, the irrepressible William was giving her a lesson in English, and then one in arithmetic. Because she was a girl, Caroline had not been taught arithmetic in the Garrison School, but in Bath William was to give her a weekly sum of money to pay for the housekeeping expenses, and she would be expected to account for it—in English. But in arithmetic William was not the best of teachers, and “we began generally where we should have ended; he supposing that I knew all that went before.” Caroline did her best to learn the multiplication tables, but never succeeded, and in later life she would always carry a written copy with her. Geometry too she found a challenge, and William would impose sanctions if she got things wrong: “He used, when making me, a grown woman, acquainted with [mathematical figures], to make me sometimes fall short at dinner if I did not guess the angle right of the piece of pudding I was helping myself to!”

Her next lesson was in singing. William accompanied her on the harpsichord, and he encouraged her in a technique for practicing that strikes us as odd but was widely accepted at the time: singing with a gag in the mouth. And then “by way of relaxation we talked of Astronomy.” The writing was on the wall.

Anxious that Caroline should happily integrate herself into the home he shared with Alexander and the Bulmans, William had portrayed Mrs. Bulman as someone who would be “a well-informed and well-meaning Friend,” and her daughter, a few years younger than Caroline, “an agreeable companion.” The Bulmans paid one-third of the thirty guineas rent and occupied part of the ground floor of the house in New King Street. Caroline and Alexander slept in the attic rooms, and William had the middle floor, the front room of which was “furnished in the newest and most handsomest stile” and was spacious enough for rehearsals and the performance of chamber music. Caroline was to get on well enough with Mrs. Bulman, although she doubted whether she would ever need some of the more sophisticated recipes that Mrs. Bulman taught her, but Miss Bulman she found to be “little better than an idiot.” Caroline had grown
up in a household of brothers, and she related well to the men around her, but women often taxed her slender reserve of patience.

This was especially the case with William’s servant, “a hot-headed old Welsh woman” named Betty. Betty had until now worked happily enough under Mrs. Bulman’s supervision, but Caroline gradually took over as her English improved. Relations between Caroline and Betty soon became fraught. Back in Hanover Anna had insisted on the highest standards, and Caroline was shocked at the state of William’s cutlery and tea service and was determined to put matters to rights. “[T]hose articles which I was to take in charge such as Tea-things, glasses &c &c were nearly all destreued, Elivory hand[ll]es of Knief & Fork and their Blades eaten up by rust, Hilters [handles] of the Tea-Urne &c were found in the Ash-hole.” But it was the first time in her life that Caroline had given orders, and she had no idea how to do this in an acceptable manner. There was also the problem of meals. When the season started, William was out all day, so Caroline would ask at breakfast what he wanted for dinner, and then do her best to convey these instructions to Betty as coming from William rather than herself. Without success: “they were received with so much ill will” that Betty gave notice and departed at Christmas.

Mrs. Bulman recommended an agency to Caroline, and she hired another servant, on one month’s notice on either side. This girl proved no more satisfactory than Betty; and so began a procession of comings and goings, some involving pickpockets and prostitutes, until a friend advised Caroline to take up references before offering anyone a job.

Shopping was equally traumatic, for this too was a new experience for Caroline, and her English consisted of no more than a few words. After only six weeks in Bath she “was sent alone among Fisherwomen, Butchers basket women &c and brought home whatever in my fright I could pick up.” But unknown to her, Alexander was quietly shadowing her steps, ready to intervene should she get into real difficulties. Family legend was to insist that on one occasion she brought home a live suckling pig under the impression it was dead.

The winter of 1772–73 proved a difficult time for Caroline. William was so preoccupied with musical engagements that he could hear Caroline sing only while he was eating breakfast. This meal took place at seven o’clock, or even earlier, “much too early for me; for I would rather have remained up all night than be obliged to rise at so early an hour.” His meal
eaten, William would rush out of the house, leaving Caroline with instructions for long hours of tedious singing practice. Then in February came the sad news that their eldest sibling, Sophia, had been widowed, leaving her with six children to support, the youngest only a few months old. William and Alexander paid off her debts, but at such a distance, there was little else they could do to help.

Alexander too was out of the house for most of the day during the season, but (as Caroline records ruefully)

if at any time he found me alone, it did me no good, for he never was of a cheerful disposition but always looking on the dark side of everything, and I was much disheartened by his declaring it to be impossible for my Brother to teach me anything which would answer any other purpose but that of making me miserable.

But the season would not last for ever. Come Easter, William would surely be free to keep his promise to train her to sing.