

Benjamin Franklin and the Origins of American Music
Society of Fellows Conference, 2022
Dr. Billy Coleman

Primary Documents

From Benjamin Franklin to Peter Franklin, [before 1765]

ms not found; reprinted from Benjamin Franklin, *Experiments ana Observations on Electricity*, 1769 edition, pp. 473–8.²

Founders Online: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-11-02-0161>

[NB: The ability to read the musical examples in this letter is neither necessary nor expected]

In its surviving printed form this letter is headed “To Mr. P. F. Newport, New England,” and since it begins “Dear Brother,” the person addressed could only have been Franklin’s brother, for many years a merchant and shipmaster in that town. Comparatively little is known of this member of the family, fourteen years older than Benjamin, and there is no other evidence than this letter that Peter wrote ballads or was interested in music. The verses he had written and asked Benjamin to have set to music have not survived in any identifiable form. Readers interested in eighteenth-century music, however, may be grateful to him, since he provided the occasion for the response printed here, which reveals a good deal of his more famous brother’s views on that subject.

*As printed in *Experiments and Observations*, the letter is undated and appears near the end of the volume close to and after another letter on a musical subject addressed to Lord Kames, dated June 2, 1765. This letter must have been written before that date, for it is known that Peter Franklin had moved from Newport to Philadelphia and had become postmaster of the latter city by October 1764, remaining there until his death in 1766.*

[Before 1765]

Dear Brother,

***I like your ballad, and think it well adapted for your purpose of discountenancing expensive foppery, and encouraging industry and frugality. If you can get it generally sung in your country, it may probably have a good deal of the effect you hope and expect from it. But as you aimed at making it general, I wonder you chose so uncommon a measure in poetry, that none of the tunes in common use will suit it. Had you fitted it to an old one, well known, it must have spread much faster than I doubt it will do from the best new tune we can get compos’d for it. I think too, that if you had given it to some country girl in the heart of the Massachusets, who has never heard any other than psalm tunes, or *Chery Chace*, the *Children in the Wood*, the *Spanish Lady*,³ and such old simple ditties, but has naturally a good ear, she might more probably have made a pleasing popular tune for you, than any of our masters here, and more proper for your purpose, which would best be answered, if every word could as it is sung be understood by all that hear it, and if the emphasis you intend for particular words could be given by the singer as well as by the reader; much of the force and impression of the song depending on those circumstances. I will however get it as well done for you as I can.

Do not imagine that I mean to depreciate the skill of our composers of music here; they are admirable at pleasing *practised* ears, and know how to delight *one another*; but, in composing for songs, the reigning taste seems to be quite out of nature, or rather the reverse of nature, and yet like a torrent, hurries them all away with it; one or two perhaps only excepted.

You, in the spirit of some ancient legislators, would influence the manners of your country by the united powers of poetry and music. By what I can learn of *their* songs, the music was simple, conformed itself to the usual pronunciation of words, as to measure, cadence or emphasis, &c. never disguised and confounded the language by making a long syllable short, or a short one long when sung; their singing was only a more pleasing, because a melodious manner of speaking; it was capable of all the graces of prose oratory, while it added the pleasure of harmony. A modern song, on the contrary, neglects all the proprieties and beauties of common speech, and in their place introduces its *defects* and *absurdities* as so many graces. I am afraid you will hardly take my word for this, and therefore I must endeavour to support it by proof. Here is the first song I lay my hand on. It happens to be a composition of one of our greatest masters, the ever famous Handel. It is not one of his juvenile performances, before his taste could be improved and formed: It appeared when his reputation was at the highest, is greatly admired by all his admirers, and is really excellent in its kind. It is called, *The additional FAVOURITE Song in Judas Maccabeus*.⁴ Now I reckon among the defects and improprieties of common speech, the following, viz.

1. *Wrong placing the accent or emphasis*, by laying it on words of no importance, or on wrong syllables.
2. *Drawling*; or extending the sound of words or syllables beyond their natural length.
3. *Stuttering*; or making many syllables of one.
4. *Unintelligibleness*; the result of the three foregoing united.
5. *Tautology*; and
6. *Screaming*, without cause.

For the *wrong placing of the accent, or emphasis*, see it on the word *their* instead of being on the word *vain*.



And on the word *from*, and the wrong syllable *like*.



For the *Drawling*, see the last syllable of the word *wounded*.



Nor can heal the wounded Heart

And in the syllable *wis*, and the word *from*, and syllable *bove*



God-like Wisdom from a - bove

For the *Stuttering*, see the words *ne'er relieve*, in



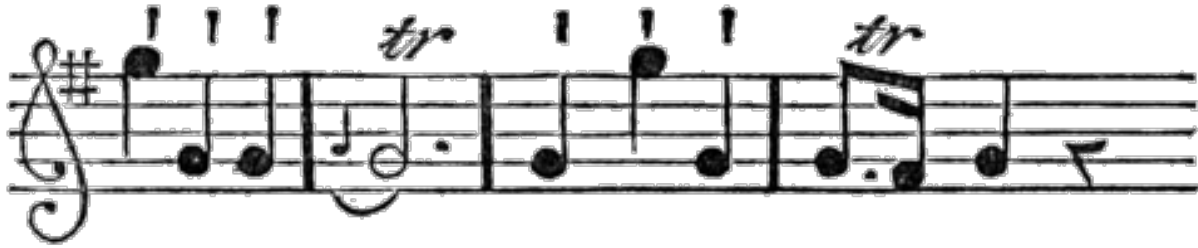
Ma - gick Charms can ne'er re - lieve you

Here are four syllables made of one, and eight of three; but this is moderate. I have seen in another song that I cannot now find, seventeen syllables made of three, and sixteen of one; the latter I remember was the word *charms*; viz. *Cha, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, a, arms*. Stammering with a witness!

For the *Unintelligibleness*; given this whole song to any taught singer, and let her sing it to any company that have never heard it; you shall find they will not understand three words in ten. It is therefore that at the oratorio's and operas one sees with books in their hands all those who desire to understand what they hear sung by even our best performers.

For the *Tautology*; you have, *with their vain mysterious art*, twice repeated; *Magic charms can ne'er relieve you*, three times. *Nor can heal the wounded heart*, three times. *Godlike wisdom from above*, twice; and, *this alone can ne'er deceive you*, two or three times. But this is reasonable when compared with *the Monster Polypheme, the Monster Polypheme*, a hundred times over and over, in his admired *Acis and Galatea*.⁵

As to the *screaming*; perhaps I cannot find a fair instance in this song; but whoever has frequented our operas will remember many. And yet here methinks the words *no* and *e'er*, when sung to these notes, have a little of the air of *screaming*, and would actually be scream'd by some singers.



No magic charms can e'er re—lieve you.

I send you enclosed the song with its music at length. Read the words without the repetitions. Observe how few they are, and what a shower of notes attend them: You will then perhaps be inclined to think with me, that though the words might be the principal part of an ancient song, they are of small importance in a modern one; they are in short only a *pretence for singing*. I am, as ever, Your affectionate brother,

B.F.

P. S. I might have mentioned *Inarticulation* among the defects in common speech that are assumed as beauties in modern singing. But as that seems more the fault of the singer than of the composer, I omitted it in what related merely to the composition. The fine singer in the present mode, stifles all the hard consonants, and polishes away all the rougher parts of words that serve to distinguish them one from another; so that you hear nothing but an admirable pipe, and understand no more of the song, than you would from its tune played on any other instrument. If ever it was the ambition of musicians to make instruments that should imitate the human voice, that ambition seems now reversed, the voice aiming to be like an instrument. Thus wigs were first made to imitate a good natural head of hair; but when they became fashionable, though in unnatural forms, we have seen natural hair dressed to look like wigs.

Editorial Notes:

[Note numbering follows the *Franklin Papers* source.]

2. Printed as Letter LVI, though it should have been numbered LVIII, as it was when it was reprinted in the 1774 edition, pp. 491–6.
3. Both “Chevy Chace” and “The Spanish Lady” are contained in *The Minstrelsy of England* (2 vols., Angener, London, 1905–1909), and V. Jackson, *Melodies from the Thirteenth to the Eighteenth Century* (Dent, London, 1910). No modern printing of “The Children in the Wood” has been located. The editors are indebted to Brooks Shepard, Jr., librarian of the Yale Music Library, for this information.
4. The Israelitish Woman’s aria, “Wise men flatt’ring may deceive us,” in “Judas Maccabeus,” Act II, *Georg Friedrich Händel’s Werke*, XXII (Leipzig, [1866]), 152–7. In this authoritative edition the aria is set in the key of F; for the excerpts given below BF was probably using a popularized edition of the single aria, in which the music had been transposed to the key of G.
5. Chorus, “Wretched Lovers!,” in “Acis and Galatea,” Act II, *ibid.*, III (Leipzig, [1859]), 53–9.

From Benjamin Franklin to Lord Kames, 2 June 1765

als: Scottish Record Office

Founders Online: <https://founders.archives.gov/documents/Franklin/01-12-02-0078>

Cravenstreet, London, June 2. 1765.

My dear Lord

[...]

In my Passage to America, I read your excellent Work, the Elements of Criticism, in which I found great Entertainment, much to admire, and nothing to reprove.⁸ I only wish'd you had examin'd more fully the Subject of Music, and demonstrated that the Pleasure Artists feel in hearing much of that compos'd in the modern Taste, is not the natural Pleasure arising from Melody or Harmony of Sounds, but of the same kind with the Pleasure we feel on seeing the surprizing Feats of Tumblers and Rope Dancers, who execute difficult Things.⁹ For my part, I take this to be really the Case and suppose it the Reason why those who being unpractis'd in Music, and therefore unacquainted with those Difficulties, have little or no Pleasure in hearing this Music. Many Pieces of it are mere Compositions of Tricks. I have sometimes at a Concert attended by a common Audience plac'd myself so as to see all their Faces, and observ'd no Signs of Pleasure in them during the Performance of much that was admir'd by the Performers themselves; while a plain old Scottish Tune, which they disdain'd and could scarcely be prevail'd on to play, gave manifest and general Delight.

Give me leave on this Occasion to extend a little the Sense of your Position, That "Melody and Harmony are separately agreeable, and in Union delightful;" and to give it as my Opinion, that the Reason why the Scotch Tunes have liv'd so long, and will probably live forever (if they escape being stifled in modern affected Ornament) is merely this, that they are really Compositions of Melody and Harmony united, or rather that their Melody is Harmony. I mean the simple Tunes sung by a single Voice. As this will appear paradoxical I must explain my Meaning. In common Acceptation indeed, only an agreeable *Succession* of Sounds is called *Melody*, and only the *Co-existence* of agreeing Sounds, *Harmony*. But since the Memory is capable of retaining for some Moments a perfect Idea of the Pitch of a past Sound, so as to compare with it the Pitch of a succeeding Sound, and judge truly of their Agreement or Disagreement, there may and does arise from thence a Sense of Harmony between present and past Sounds, equally pleasing with that between two present Sounds. Now the Construction of the old Scotch Tunes is this, that almost every succeeding *emphatical* Note, is a Third, a Fifth, an Octave, or in short some Note that is in Concord with the preceding Note. Thirds are chiefly used, which are very pleasing Concords. I use the Word *emphatical*, to distinguish those Notes which have a Stress laid on them in Singing the Tune, from the lighter connecting Notes, that serve merely, like Grammar Articles, to tack the others together.

That we have a most perfect Idea of a Sound just past, I might appeal to all acquainted with Music, who know how easy it is to repeat a Sound in the same Pitch with one just heard. In Tuning an Instrument, a good Ear can as easily determine that two Strings are in Unison, by sounding them separately, as by sounding them together; their Disagreement is also as easily, I believe I may say more easily and better distinguish'd, when sounded separately; for when sounded together, tho' you know by the Beating that one is higher than the other, you cannot tell which it is. Farther, when we consider by whom these ancient Tunes were composed, and how they were first performed, we shall see that such harmonical Succession of Sounds was natural and even necessary in their Construction. They were compos'd by the Minstrels of those days, to be plaid on the Harp accompany'd by the Voice. The Harp was strung with Wire, and had no Contrivance like that in the modern

Harpichord, by which the Sound of a preceding Note could be stopt the Moment a succeeding Note began. To avoid *actual* Discord it was therefore necessary that the succeeding emphatic Note should be a Chord with the preceding, as their Sounds must exist at the same time. Hence arose that Beauty in those Tunes that has so long pleas'd, and will please for ever, tho' Men scarce know why. That they were originally compos'd for the Harp, and of the most simple kind, I mean a Harp without any Half Notes but those in the natural Scale, and with no more than two Octaves of Strings from C. to C.

I conjecture from another Circumstance, which is, that not one of those Tunes really ancient has a single artificial Half Note in it; and that in Tunes where it was most convenient for the Voice, to use the middle Notes of the Harp, and place the Key in F. there the B. which if used should be a B flat, is always omitted by passing over it with a Third. The Connoisseurs in modern Music will say I have no Taste, but I cannot help adding, that I believe our Ancestors in hearing a good Song, distinctly articulated, sung to one of those Tunes and accompanied by the Harp, felt more real Pleasure than is communicated by the generality of modern Operas, exclusive of that arising from the Scenery and Dancing. Most Tunes of late Composition, not having the natural Harmony united with their Melody, have recourse to the artificial Harmony of a Bass and other accompanying Parts. This Support, in my Opinion, the old Tunes do not need, and are rather confus'd than aided by it. Whoever has heard James Oswald¹ play them on his Violoncello, will be less inclin'd to dispute this with me. I have more than once seen Tears of Pleasure in the Eyes of his Auditors; and yet I think even his Playing those Tunes would please more, if he gave them less modern Ornament.

My Son, when we parted, desired me to present his affectionate Respects to you, Lady Kaims, and your amiable Children; be so good with those to accept mine, and believe me, with sincerest Esteem,
My dear Lord, Your Lordship's most obedient and most humble Servant

B Franklin

P.S. I do promise myself the Pleasure of seeing you and my other Friends in Scotland before I return to America.²

Addressed: To / The Rt. honourable Lord Kaims / one of the Judges, &c / Edinburgh / per favour of / Mr Alexander

Editorial Notes:

[*Note numbering follows the Franklin Papers source.*]

⁸. On Aug. 17, 1762, BF wrote Kames that he intended to read his *Elements of Criticism* on his passage to America. See above, X, 148.

⁹. The section in Kames's work that deals with melody and harmony in music and that led to BF's extended discussion here is in I, 166–70. For another, contemporary expression of BF's opinions on music, see his letter to his brother Peter, above, XI, 538–43.

¹. James Oswald (d. 1769) was a Scottish violinist, compiler, and musical publisher, who settled in London about 1741–42, probably under the patronage of Lord Bute; in 1761 he was appointed chamber composer to George III. The anthem “God Save the King” has sometimes been attributed to him. Eric Blom, ed., *Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (5th edit., London, 1954), III, 688–90; VI, 461–2.

². In November 1771 BF spent five days with the Kameses at their estate at Blair-Drummond