

The 'Auld Lang Syne' question

In 1997 John Treherne, Head of Gateshead's Music Service, discovered that the score of a forgotten opera, 'Rosina', had been located in the Central Library. The composer William Shield, Swalwell born, was later celebrated as the Master of the King's Music and a major composer of ballad operas in Covent Garden, London. Rosina dates from 1783. His opera is a series of brief songs and choruses, telling a pastoral tale reputedly set in Gibside, in which the heroine is Rosina. The work begins with a short overture in three sections; the final coda moves into simple two time over a bag pipe drone, which underpins something very close to the very familiar melody of Auld Lang Syne.

The Gateshead Youth Orchestra needed new repertoire and the overture looked ideal. It would be performed in the early summer in the North East and taken overseas on tour. A press release was circulated to stimulate interest.

The Journal and Chronicle ran a feature on this discovery, and soon all the major national newspapers included articles. John Treherne was interviewed on Radio Newcastle, BBC Radio 3 and 4 and a radio station in Sydney, Australia. The Youth Orchestra was recorded by the BBC V and given a fair amount of air time.

Quite understandably a major debate ensued, whether a celebrated Scottish song could have a melody created by an Englishman, and this is ongoing. Alistair Anderson, a leading expert on folk music, is of the opinion that the song exists in a much earlier form and that William Shield had probably borrowed it. This is certainly possible: much of Shield's music was often appropriated from other sources, though he generally did acknowledge this in his published works.

Whatever the truth, William Shield's output is varied and attractive, ranging from songs to string Quartets (showing the influence of his friend Joseph Haydn) and several dozen most attractive operas which well deserve more attention today. Buried in Westminster Abbey, he shares a grave with that splendid pianist and piano manufacturer Muzio Clementi, with whom he was on very good terms.

Gateshead Council has erected a plaque in Shield's memory near Swalwell Roundabout (opposite the petrol station) and there is a fine memorial in Whickham St Mary's Churchyard.