

Crabtree the Composer: Under the Lamplight

Emeritus Professor Martin Comte OAM

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Like several of my predecessors I too record my feelings of inadequacy to the task.

I hope you like happy endings because this is how the tale I'm about to unfold concludes. But I must warn you that, just as in fairy tales, this is also a story of pain and suffering – and a *curse*.

My aim is to put Joseph Crabtree the Composer under the spotlight – but I suppose in his day it was referred to as being put under the lamplight. In this context, I was interested to read that Elder Kate Burr ridge noted in her stunning 2014 Oration (“Joseph Crabtree – Rogue Lexicographer – Wild Etymologist.”) that during his Queens College Oxford days, Joseph Crabtree referred to himself as ‘Lanthorn’, the word meaning ‘lantern’ or ‘lamplight’. So it seems *especially* appropriate that I put Crabtree the Composer under the Lamplight.

I am a fossicker of second-hand shops and antique shops, and it was thus that my ‘acquaintance’ with Joseph Crabtree began back in 1968 – although I was not aware of it at the time. I have always been fascinated with old editions of music. After graduating with my music degree from Melbourne University’s Conservatorium of Music I headed to London in 1968 and there discovered the book and music collectors’ paradise – Travis and Emery in Cecil Court. In addition to a couple of fascinating editions of music dating back over 200 years, there was a small pile of clearly unloved and musty-smelling sheet music tied in string and being sold as a ‘job lot’ for 22 pounds; quite a lot of money for an impoverished music student who was travelling through Europe on the cheap.

When I arrived back in Australia some months later I played through the sheet music and essentially dismissed it. And there it rested in my piano stool for several years before being relegated to a box of essentially uninteresting music. But, being a hoarder of the worst degree, I could never face throwing it out. It has moved with me to six different homes since then, and been put into storage a few times during periods when I was living overseas.

It was only when Scholar Murray Bragge, my friend of forty-two years, invited me to attend last year's Crabtree Oration that a small light of 'acquaintance' – for want of a better word – shone in the deep recesses of my mind. And as a consequence I went looking for the cardboard box with its collection of musty old sheet music. It was not where I thought it was. But having an obsessive-compulsive disposition I went through every cupboard and out-of-the-way space in my home looking for it. My frustration level reached a high point until I remembered that when I retired from my university several years ago I put the contents of my office in sixteen large tea chests which I had never opened since. Could the music be there? And yes, when I reached tea chest Number 7, on which I'd written "Mostly to be discarded" there it was, the music I had bought in London 47 years earlier for 22 pounds. Happily silver fish had not attacked it. But the musty smell that I associated with it back in Travis and Emery's bookshop all of those years ago was still there.

I was excited when I began going through the sheet music. But you can imagine just how ecstatic I became when I touched my first piece that said, "Waltz" by Joseph Crabtree! A few more pieces by similar lesser known composers and there was another one, more generically titled "Dance". In all, I had four original compositions by Joseph Crabtree, all of which were all published in the 1820s: two of them by the publishing firm James Freeman of Charing Cross, one by Rutter and McCarthy of New Bond St., and the fourth by Cappi and Diabelli, the publishing firm founded by the eponymous composer in conjunction with his friend Pietro Cappi in 1818. This company went on to publish much of the work of Johann Strauss II and Josef Strauss. Sadly, to my disappointment, I realized that our Joseph Crabtree was not a composer who could hold a candle (let alone a lamplight) to the Strauss family.

But before I go any further, let me play on the piano for you, just part of one of the pieces. I won't play you all of this waltz, which goes on for many pages – but enough to convince you not to rush out to procure a copy of the work. It does nonetheless have a catchy little tune and part of it is somewhat reminiscent of the Schubert dances. At the same time, the left hand accompaniment is 'heavy' and 'uneven' in parts and not overly 'pianistic'.

Piano performance of 'Waltz' by Joseph Crabtree.

And so my research into lesser known composers – and in particular, Australian composers – took a new direction. Speaking of Australian composers, I should point out the red light on the wall behind me is lit *in perpetuum* in memory of Alberto Zelman Junior, born in Melbourne in 1874 and a prominent member of this, the Savage Club. Zelman, a violinist, conductor and composer, founded

what became the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. In 1922 he made a very successful tour of Europe, conducting both the London Symphony and the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras.

But to return to Crabtree ... The discovery of these four compositions had whetted my curiosity. But search as I did, I was unable to find any mention of the man and composer. Of course, I began with key music reference books – but to no avail. I should, of course, have gone straight to the most reliable of all sources: *past* Crabtree Orations. And in reading these I was enlightened by several orators on the man's musical prowess. Elder Paul Williams ("Joseph Crabtree and the Great Schism of the Fagotti") for example, in his 2013 oration entitled "Joseph Crabtree and the Great Schism of the Fagotti", suggested that the very name Crabtree and 'faggot' or 'fagotti' go hand in glove, for the word 'fagott' means 'bassoon', and Crabtree was an exemplar of bassoon playing. And long before this, in 1979, Elder Leonard Dommatt ("Crabtree the Indomitable"), whose name is synonymous with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, detailed Crabtree's burnishing skills as a violinist. With such knowledge I was spurred on in my quest to find out more.

At the same time, I was surprised that I had not made an important connection for, over the years, I had heard flippant references to the 'Curse of the Crab' and mistakenly assumed that it was a form of venereal infection or infestation. In my ignorance I never associated this curse with the polymath and would-be composer of note, our Joseph Crabtree. The term 'Curse of the Crab' was coined by Beethoven in 1824 in a letter to his emotionally insecure and wayward nephew, Karl, son of Beethoven's late brother and of whom Beethoven had custody. In quite a long letter sent from Bonn to the young eighteen-year-old Karl, who had commenced studying at the University of Vienna, Beethoven wrote:

I have become afflicted by what I call the 'Curse of the Crab'. Joseph Crabtree, an Englishman – although the Scots also claim him – had a book published some decades ago of melodies set to select stanzas of several well-known poets, including that Englishman William Wordsworth. It's the work of a clearly precocious, but not overly talented 20-year-old; indeed, they're little more than the work of an amateur with pretensions. The accompaniments are simple – so much so that I am surprised that the book was published. (The English, of course, will put anything into print!) But included amongst these small and irrelevant works are a few melodies that are haunting to say the least and, indeed, keep floating around one's head – a most annoying irritation when composing. I find them an impediment to my creativity and have tried in vain to banish these melodies from all conscious recollection. But even so, they keep appearing in the most unexpected of notes that I

pen to paper. Indeed, last month I was writing a new sonata and unconsciously, in the second movement – a beautiful slow movement if I may say so – there for all to hear were strains of one of Crabtree’s haunting melodies; the Crab was crossing the manuscript! One of these pathetic, albeit haunting, tunes had infiltrated my writing – unconsciously – no doubt because of my acute musical ear, which, I must tell you, is giving me some trouble because of my hearing loss.

Herr Mozart (who, by the way, was born just two years after the said Joseph Crabtree) had also fallen victim to the ‘Curse of the Crab’. It’s like a cancer that lies dormant in one’s being. One is not even aware that it is there – and, in the most unexpected of compositional moments out come several bars from one of these melodies. The book should be banned. Certainly, I’m warning my own students never to play through the melodies lest they fall victims to its curse. Sadly poor Herr Schubert has the Crab. And, as if that’s not enough, he has confided in me that he also has syphilis; so sad for a man who is only 27 and has much to offer the music world.

And so the letter went on. But I had read enough.

“What were these melodies that had been composed by the young 20-year-old in 1874 that had caused the likes of Beethoven so much angst?” I asked myself. And where could I find the publication in which they appeared?

I thought that Beethoven’s reference to Wordsworth might give me a clue and I went once again to other Crabtree Orations. Elder Bryony Cosgrove’s brilliant 2011 Oration (“Crabtree – Purveyor of the Daffodil as a Tool of Seduction”) provided me with a valuable lead. Elder Cosgrove highlighted the Wordsworth-Crabtree connection and in so doing revealed an unsavoury aspect to Crabtree’s psyche: he was besotted – unhealthily – with seduction, even enlisting daffodils in their hundreds to gain favour with innocent young women. Aha, thought I, this, it would seem is what he has also done with these seductive melodies that so irritated Beethoven and his ilk. Crabtree was not merely content to seduce women – but even *composers* (who, I should point out, were – at the time – predominantly men!). Of course I dismissed immediately the thought that he could have been a pervert. And thank God he stuck to daffodils and never did anything seductive or obscene with gladdies!

Then, out of the blue – not yellow – when I was engaged in research into the English piano company, Broadwood & Sons, this heretofore incomprehensible puzzle was slightly less obtuse. In 1761 John Broadwood, who was born in Scotland, began working in London for one of the greatest harpsichord makers of

the 19th century, the Swiss-born Burkat Shudi, one of whose fine instruments was played in London by none other than the young boy Mozart. John Broadwood inherited the business in 1783 (although he had, in effect, been the head since 1771) and thus the firm Broadwood & Sons was born. By this time he had already ventured into the relatively new field of piano development and manufacture. Even today Broadwood & Sons still holds a Royal Warrant. One who recognized the quality of these instruments was none other than the Empress Maria Theresa who was at the time the sovereign of Austria, Hungary, Croatia, Bohemia, Transylvania, Mantua, Milan, the Austrian Netherlands, and Parma, among others. It seems that she was well connected – indeed, so much so, that shortly after her purchase, an order came in from no less an illustrious person than the great composer and musician, Joseph Haydn in Vienna. But interest in these pianos was not confined to musicians and music lovers. We can see one in a portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Writers like Jane Austen – in *Emma* – made reference to the Broadwood keyboard. The wife of Sir Horatio Nelson acquired a Broadwood in 1797 – presumably not for Sir Horatio to play because he had already lost his arm by then and there was little music at the time for single-handed pianists – although I’m happy to say that this situation has been addressed in the intervening years.

I mention Broadwood pianos because, in 1778, as a young man of 24, Joseph Crabtree formed a friendship with John Broadwood through their membership of the holiest (if I may use the word irreverently) of London Clubs – the White’s Club, which one of my predecessors, Elder Andrew Schnaider, spoke about so scintillatingly in his Oration in 2009, entitled ‘Crabtree in Clubland’, noting that “White’s was and remains the oldest ... and most prestigious London club ...”. (I should note here that Richard Savage – after whom the club we are in now was named – had yet to establish *his* own club in London.)

Now, despite the superiority of his instruments, and having the Maria Theresas of the world on his books, John Broadwood was nonetheless in a competitive market. And so he was eager to explore novel ways of marketing his instruments. It was at this point that our Joseph Crabtree, musician and would-be composer, came to the fore. Not one to let mediocrity spoil a good thing, Crabtree persuaded Broadwood to publish these short, juvenile works – the very same works that Beethoven subsequently described as having little if any merit – and to include this publication as a *gift* with the piano stool that went with the sale of each instrument. Broadwood, being a perfectionist in all things, arranged what was described at the time, as the most handsome of publications, the cover of which was, in truth, much superior to the contents. And thus it was that Joseph Crabtree’s insignificant melodies came to find their way into the great houses of Europe and beyond – even coming to the attention of the leading

composers of the day. Interestingly, in describing these melodies, one could not echo the words contained in a letter from Coleridge to Wordsworth: "Since Milton, I know of no poet with so many *felicities* and unforgettable lines and stanzas as you." Sadly, this sentiment could not be said of Crabtree's unmusical melodies (despite the fact that some were set to Wordsworth's words) – but they were good enough for the piano stools of Europe.

Another piece of the puzzle had fallen into place for me. But I needed to find a copy of this mysterious handsome volume of melodies.

Sadly, I was confronted by several proverbial and structural brick walls. There was nothing in the British Library, the Rare books collections of the Library of Congress, or the libraries of Oxford, Cambridge, Yale and Harvard Universities. I even tried Beethoven's Haus in Bonn, which is now a museum and a treasure trove for all things Beethoven.

I finally reached the point where I thought my research could go no further and, for no apparent reason, I found myself repeating the oft-quoted line, "The hardest thing to see is what is in front of your eyes". And then I recalled that Elder Tim Smith revealed in last year's – 2015 – lustrous Oration ("Crabtree and his encounters with Antipodean Pettifoggers") that in his twilight years Joseph Crabtree – whose attainments also included a study of law – had spent some time in Melbourne and, indeed, been welcomed to the pinnacle of institutions, the Port Phillip Bar. Other orators also had discovered Australian connections. Could it be, thought I, that I might find something here in our fair city? I wasted no time in going to our State Library with its majestic reading room and plunged myself into the music archives. But no – nothing.

Feeling despondent, and facing the fact that my searches had come to an end, I decided to walk home to Parkville, along Swanston St. and through the grounds of The University of Melbourne to Royal Parade. The last two buildings I passed before stepping into Royal Parade were the white Conservatorium of Music on my left, and the Grainger Museum on my right. The Grainger of course is the purpose-built museum established by one of our foremost – and one of the world's most eccentric – composers, Percy Aldridge Grainger (1882-1961). Officially opened in 1938, it now holds over 100,000 artefacts. The sombre colour of its bricks and its unusual construction have not infrequently led to it being mistaken for a public toilet. Given what we know about Grainger, I'm not sure that he would be offended. Certainly, it can be said that he was not averse to a good tune and could whip one up in no time.

After two weeks of scrupulous reading, opening and closing boxes, I found a hand-annotated copy of Grainger's arrangement of a famous Brahms lullaby (penned by Grainger in Chicago in 1922) and testimony to Grainger's virtuosic pianistic skills. But what was significant for me was that Grainger had written in pencil on the first page of the composer's proof: "For J.C." To scholars unacquainted with Joseph Crabtree, it is reasonable to expect that they assumed Grainger was having a religious moment – and had dedicated the virtuosic arrangement to Jesus Christ. I suspected differently – and was spurred on in my search for the handsome covered book of Crabtree's melodies that for several decades had gone out with the sale of every Broadwood piano.

And, after just three more days, I found it. And yes, it is a most handsome volume. There are two melodies that I recognized in the little works of Crabtree. Let me play them for you. ...

Piano performance of two melodies by Joseph Crabtree.

The first is clearly a precursor of the famous Brahms *Lullaby* that Grainger arranged so virtuosically – and on the score of which he had written "For J.C.". The second is the offensive one that caused Beethoven and others so much grief. Its notes proved to be even more insidious and pervasive, appearing in – indeed, infecting – the work of several composers. And it is to this that I must now turn attention, for in 1938, less than 80 years ago, a German composer, Norbert Schultze – a successful composer of songs, opera and film music – managed to break the curse – probably unwittingly – when he composed *Lili Marlene*. In doing so he has saved future composers from falling victim to the Curse of the Crab. "How?" you might ask. It is my scholarly opinion that by picking-up Crabtree's offending melodic intervals and phrases – in the second of the melodies I just played – and developing them *musically*, and setting them *appropriately* and with *flair* to *words* (which Crabtree failed to do successfully), Norbert Schultze expunged the Curse of the Crab. After 164 years, these notes were finally resolved and united satisfactorily with words. Although there is no record of him being aware that he had broken the curse, the music world nonetheless owes him a great debt. His haunting melody, known to us today as *Lili Marlene*, 'confronted' the curse by developing snippets of Crabtree's melody and giving us an evergreen masterpiece that was recorded first by Lale Andersen, and subsequently by the likes of Marlene Dietrich, Perry Como and Connie Francis. You may be interested to know that when the original recording artist, Lale Andersen, was asked in 1972 if she could explain its popularity, she replied, "Can the wind explain why it became a storm?"

The rest of my research was easy: a mere look at notebooks, manuscripts, published and unpublished music of some of our great composers to see who else had had their music infected with the Curse of the Crab. Fortunately these volumes were relatively easily accessible.

And so ladies and gentlemen I will play for you a short selection of composers' unpublished works that were infected by the Curse of the Crab – selections only from Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms (who was doubly afflicted, being a victim of both melodies), and Dvorak. But before I do, let me leave you with one thought: does it not strike you as just a little too coincidental that Joseph Crabtree's family name was originally "Lantham", meaning 'lantern' or 'lamplight' (as Elder Kate Burrige has told us) – and eerily Crabtree's former name is in the very first line of *Lili Marlene*: "Underneath the Lantern", or "Under the Lamplight"! Despite this, it *is* a happy ending! And although we might not be able to answer the rhetorical question posed by Dale Andersen, who first recorded *Lili Marlene*, we at least can now explain the 'Curse of the Crab' and how it was broken.

Piano performance of works by Mozart, Beethoven, Chopin, Brahms, and Dvorak, containing melodies that were clearly infected by the 'Curse of the Crab'.

References

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mcomte@ozemail.com.au