

## Where is thy zeal?

Jonathan Battishill, his Anthem *O Lord, look down from Heaven*,  
and a possible error in its musical text.

Christopher Maxim

This article was published in *Organists' Review*, no. 373, February 2009, pp. 31-37.

The English composer Jonathan Battishill (1738-1801) is all but forgotten outside the world of Anglican church music. Indeed, even within that community, few singers know more than a handful of Anglican chants.<sup>1</sup> Some readers may be familiar with an organ voluntary that found its way into C. H. Trevor's *Old English Organ Music* series;<sup>2</sup> and there is a hymn-tune in *Songs of Praise* that is adapted from a melody by Battishill.<sup>3</sup> Some will be familiar with the fine anthem *Call to remembrance*<sup>4</sup> – though one suspects that more will have heard of it than actually heard it or performed it. The one piece by Battishill that has found its rightful and enduring place in the repertoire is his magnificent anthem, *O Lord, look down from Heaven*. It is a masterpiece of its type, not too difficult to sing, finely wrought, and full of intense feeling. In addition, it contains those rib-tickling words, set in bold homophony at the climax: 'The sounding of thy bowels'. At least, it *should* contain those words. In both 'modern' editions, the text is amended – in the belief, no doubt, that the words of Isaiah (63:15), as rendered in the Authorised Version of the Bible, are a little too coarse for the sensibilities of most congregations. The older of the two editions was edited by Sir George Martin (1844-1916).<sup>5</sup> For the reference to sounding bowels, he substituted 'Where is thy zeal and thy strength?'<sup>6</sup> Watkins Shaw (1911-1996), in his more recent edition,<sup>7</sup> borrowed from

---

<sup>1</sup> Examples may be found in *The RSCM Chant Book* (Royal School of Church Music, no date). Double chants: nos 18 and 19; single chants: nos 167, 168 and 169.

<sup>2</sup> *Voluntary in B flat* in 'Old English Organ Music', Book II, ed. by C. H. Trevor (Oxford University Press, 1966), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> See *Songs of Praise*, enlarged edition, ed. by Percy Dearmer (words) and Ralph Vaughan Williams & Martin Shaw (music) (Oxford University Press, 1926; new & enlarged 1931; eighth impression 1943), no. 538: 'In our work and in our play, Jesus, be thou ever near'.

<sup>4</sup> 'Novello's Octavo Anthems', organ part by Vincent Novello (Novello & Co., no date).

<sup>5</sup> 'Novello's Octavo Anthems' (Novello & Co., no date). Sir George Martin's editing style is typical of its time, and, by modern standards, is somewhat heavy-handed. It includes expression and articulation marks, and a fleshed-out the organ accompaniment that includes a pedal part.

<sup>6</sup> These words are sung in the preceding section of the piece, and require only a small rhythmic alteration to be made for them to be accommodated at the point in question.

the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, replacing ‘sounding’ with ‘yearning’.<sup>8</sup> In the prime source, however, there is no doubt as to the words that the composer set.

Battishill’s autograph of *O Lord, look down* has not survived,<sup>9</sup> and the prime source, acknowledged by Shaw,<sup>10</sup> is a publication of 1804.<sup>11</sup> It is a handsome volume edited by John Page<sup>12</sup> and containing a preface by Dr Busby<sup>13</sup> entitled *Memoirs of the late Mr. Jonathan Battishill*.<sup>14</sup> These *Memoirs* reveal fascinating insights into the life, career and personality of Battishill. While it must be remembered that they are the uncritical eulogy of a former pupil and loyal admirer,<sup>15</sup> the *Memoirs* nevertheless paint a picture of a man of enormous talent.

Battishill’s musical gifts became evident when he was still very young. In 1747, he joined the Choir of St. Paul’s, where his vocal performances ‘astonished and delighted his hearers’. He was a studious youth and Busby states that ‘his penetrating mind never suffered an excellence of melody, harmony, or modulation to escape him, nor rested satisfied till he had fully discovered his Author’s meaning. This anxious research, aided by constant practice on the *organ*, at once stored his mind with those riches of harmonic combination and evolution

---

<sup>7</sup> ‘Novello Early Church Music’ (Novello & Co. Ltd, 1968). Henceforth *Shaw*. This edition is also typical of its period, being lighter in touch than that of Sir George Martin, and presenting the organ part as it appears in the source (manuals only). Like Martin, Shaw omits the essentially redundant figures beneath the left hand in the source. Surprisingly perhaps, but usefully, Shaw retains almost all of Martin’s performance markings.

<sup>8</sup> *Shaw*, p. 9. He notes that the Revised Standard Version has ‘heart’ instead of ‘bowels’ (A.V. = ‘the sounding of thy bowels’; R.S.V. = ‘the yearning of thy heart’); but retains ‘bowels’ in bar 74 because ‘heart’ ‘would need slurred notes if adopted’.

<sup>9</sup> See the list of Battishill’s works in Peter Ward Jones’s article: ‘Battishill, Jonathan’, in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, Vol. II, ed by Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell (Oxford University Press, 2001) (henceforth *Grove*), pp 912-913.

<sup>10</sup> *Shaw*, p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> The copy consulted by the author is Volume 299 of the Aylward Collection, Cardiff University.

<sup>12</sup> A vicar-choral at St Paul’s Cathedral. For more information about Page, see Shaw and H. Diack Johnstone’s article ‘Page, John’ in *Grove XVIII*, p. 896.

<sup>13</sup> Thomas Busby (1755-1838): English writer and musician; composer of theatrical music and other vocal works. A pupil of Battishill, he was organist of St Mary Woolnoth from 1798. See Jamie C. Kassler and Linda Trost’s article: ‘Busby, Thomas’, in *Grove IV*, pp. 650-651.

<sup>14</sup> According to *Grove II*, p. 913, this preface is a revised version of ‘Original memoirs of the late Mr, Jonathan Battishill’ *Monthly Magazine*, xiii (1802), 36-9. The *Memoirs* are too long to be reproduced here in full. The interested reader will find a complete transcription on the author’s website: [www.christophermaxim.co.uk](http://www.christophermaxim.co.uk).

<sup>15</sup> See ‘Busby, Thomas’, in *Grove IV*. Busby indicates towards the end of the *Memoirs* that he was one of the chief mourners at Battishill’s funeral.

on which he formed his style, and gave him a command of hand adequate to the execution of whatever his imagination suggested'. Busby asserts that Battishill was one of best improvisers in the country and was admired by such eminent musicians as Thomas Arne, John Stanley and William Boyce. He had 'a pleasing though not powerful voice; a tasteful and masterly style of execution on the Harpsichord; [and] a fund of entertaining information acquired by extensive reading'. As for Battishill's personality, Busby says that he had, as a young man, 'a pleasing manner, and a gay and lively disposition'. Also, 'he possessed, in an eminent degree, the power of tendering himself agreeable in every Company; and his society and instruction were courted by Persons of the highest Character and respectability.'

Armed with talent and charm, Battishill's career commenced admirably. He was successful as a composer of secular songs and, through playing the harpsichord at Covent Garden, he met and married a Miss Davies, 'an admired vocal performer'. After their marriage 'she immediately quitted the stage, to which he never permitted her to return.' Though a Draconic prohibition by the standards of today, in the eighteenth century, performing on the stage was not judged a fitting occupation for a respectable married woman.

Not long after his marriage, Battishill was appointed Organist of the united parishes of St Clement, Eastcheap<sup>16</sup> and St Martin Orgar;<sup>17</sup> and then also of Christ Church, Newgate Street.<sup>18</sup> He continued to be highly successful as a composer of secular music, particularly for the stage. Nevertheless, the composition of church music was something for which he made time within his busy schedule: 'Retiring occasionally from the gay and busy concerns of life, he indulged that propensity which had its birth in the Choir, and produced a number of

---

<sup>16</sup> This church still stands. It was rebuilt in 1683-7 by Wren. Pevsner did not care for it much, describing it as an 'unassuming little church', the interior of which is 'too plain'. See Bradley, S. and Pevsner, N., *London: The City Churches*, 'The Buildings of England' (Yale University Press, 2002), pp 78-79. Part of the organ case that Battishill would have known remains today. The organ is thought to have been built by Renatus Harris in 1696. It was placed in the west gallery. Gerard Smith took over maintenance in 1704; and Jordan in 1711. The organ was altered over the years and was moved to the south aisle in 1872. In 1936, Hill, Norman and Beard placed the upper portion of the case on top of the west porch (the gallery having been removed) and provided a detached console. All this, plus subsequent work, means that it is greatly altered from Battishill's day. See Plumley, N. M., *The Organs of the City of London* (Positif Press, 1996), pp. 64-65.

<sup>17</sup> This parish was united with that of St Clement Eastcheap because the church of St Martin Orgar was lost in the Great Fire of 1666. Its tower survived until 1847. The churchyard is still extant. See *Bradley and Pevsner*, p. 141.

<sup>18</sup> This important church was the second largest of medieval London. It was rebuilt by Wren in 1677-87. It contained steep galleries to accommodate the boys of the near-by Christ's Hospital. Bombed in WWII, the church is now a ruin. The tower, 'one of the most splendid in London' (*Bradley & Pevsner*), survives (now converted into a dwelling) and a dentist presently occupies the south western portions, constructed in 1981, where the vestry of 1760 formerly stood. See *Bradley & Pevsner*, pp. 53-54. The organ that Battishill knew was completed in 1690 by Renatus Harris. A Swell had been added in 1747 – the year Battishill entered the choir of St Paul's. See *Plumley*, pp. 159-161.

Anthems, the excellences of which have been universally confessed and admired.’ It was presumably during such solitude that, in the early summer of 1765,<sup>19</sup> Battishill composed *O Lord, look down*.

Busby was clearly aware that the intelligent early nineteenth-century reader would wonder why, if Battishill had been a man of such talent and industry, so little of his music had been heard since the early 1770s, and approaches the matter tactfully: ‘The fact is, his library, which [...] at one time consisted of between six and seven thousand volumes of the best editions of our Classical Authors, employed all the hours not occupied with his Pupils or festive friends. To this latter neglect of musical study, we are to attribute his not becoming the greatest musician the Country every produced (Purcel [*sic*] excepted) and the loss of many a composition that would have done honour to the Catalogue of English music.’ But there was a little more to it than just a voracious appetite for reading and Busby squirms a little: ‘To this division of his time we are also to impute the late decline of that promptitude and warmth of imagination which had formerly been inseparable from his performance on the Organ. Yet he sometimes, even to the last, recovered a gleam of his native fire, and in finely-conceived *fugues* poured forth all the powers of harmony and responsive melody.’ Peter Ward Jones has identified rather less coyly the reasons for the waning of Battishill’s musical powers: ‘from the mid-1770s, Battishill’s compositional activity declined and he took increasingly to over-indulgence in drink, for which he had always had a propensity’.<sup>20</sup>

Following their marriage, the composer may have ‘never permitted’ his wife to return to the stage, but Elizabeth Battishill clearly did not lose her taste for greasepaint. Ward Jones reveals that ‘the marriage was not a success, and his wife eventually lived openly with the actor Anthony Webster, with whom she went to Ireland in 1776; she died in Cork in 1777.’<sup>21</sup> The composer, did not, however, resign himself to a life of enforced bachelorhood and from about 1775 apparently lived with a woman who, on his death, called herself Ann Battishill.<sup>22</sup> Busby glosses over Battishill’s alcoholism and never mentions his wife’s elopement. In fact, he goes so far as to assert that the composer’s unhappy state of mind was caused by ‘some professional disappointment’ and his ‘insuperable grief’ at the death of his friend ‘Colonel MORRIS, killed in Holland during the late war’. Ward Jones is once again a little less delicate and rather more realistic: the ‘professional disappointment’ was Battishill’s not being

---

<sup>19</sup> The work is dated in *Six Anthems* ‘June 5, 1765’.

<sup>20</sup> *Grove* II, p. 913.

<sup>21</sup> *Grove* II, p. 913.

<sup>22</sup> *Grove* II, p. 913.

appointed organist of St Paul's on the death of John Jones in 1796 – probably because he drank too much.<sup>23</sup>

Battishill became so ill during the autumn of 1801 that he was confined to his chamber. He was advised to try sea-bathing and the air of Margate, but they made him worse. On the advice of his physicians, he took apartments at Islington but died there on Thursday, 10<sup>th</sup> December, 1801, aged 63 years. The Dean and Chapter of St Paul's may not have wished to entrust Battishill with their choir, yet they were willing to honour him in death and, in accordance with his dying wish, he was interred in the vaults of St. Paul's Cathedral, near to the grave of Dr Boyce.

So a once-promising and highly able musician probably died of alcohol abuse. And yet Busby goes on to reveal that there was even more to Battishill's talents, stating that 'what he once read or performed he scarcely ever forgot; and the longest compositions [...] were always sufficiently within his recollection to render the assistance of the text unnecessary. His reminiscence with respect to dates and other circumstances was truly astonishing. He always knew where and with whom he had dined on any particular day, however distant, and could even recollect the subjects of conversation. If he once heard any music, it was indelibly written in his mind.' If Busby is to be believed, Battishill's mental powers may have been akin to those of an autistic savant. Or would it be appropriate to draw parallels between Battishill's faculty of recall and the fabled musical memory of Mozart? Moreover, might Battishill's writing of a noble anthem, ideally suited to performance in St Paul's Cathedral, no less, in which he includes the text 'The sounding of thy bowels' be compared with Mozart's childish toilet humour evident in his letters and seemingly so at odds with his sublime music?

Clearly, in the mind of Dr Busby, Battishill was a brilliant man of great musical learning. This view of the composer, together with the quality of his extant compositions, provides the foundation for the case that there is an error in the accepted musical text of *O Lord, look down*. The passage in question is essentially identical in Martin's and Shaw's editions, and (significantly) in the prime extant source.

---

<sup>23</sup> *Grove II*, p. 913.

**Figure 1:** Bars 38-44 of Battishill's *O Lord, look down* as they appear in *Six Anthems*,<sup>24</sup> and also in the later editions of Sir George Martin (with expression marks and an altered organ part) and Shaw.

The musical score for Figure 1 consists of six staves. From top to bottom: Treble [I], Treble [II], Contra Tenore, Tenore, Bass, and Organ. The lyrics are distributed across the vocal staves as follows:  
 Treble [I]: and thy strength thy zeal and thy strength  
 Treble [II]: where is thy zeal thy zeal where is thy zeal thy zeal and thy  
 Contra Tenore: [zeal] and thy strength where where O Lord  
 Tenore: strength and thy strength where is thy zeal thy zeal thy zeal and thy strength where  
 Bass: -ty where  
 Organ: Accompanying keyboard part.

If we examine the Treble parts of bars 38-44, it seems impossible that a musician of Battishill's capabilities would have conceived them as they appear in the prime source and the modern editions. The falling 7<sup>th</sup> (E flat to F) in Treble II in the fourth bar of the extract (bar 41 of the piece) is just too awkward, and the Treble I phrase makes little sense in the context. Surely the Treble II part from bar 38 to the first half of bar 41 belongs to the first Treble.

**Figure 2:** Bars 38-44 of Treble parts of Battishill's *O Lord, look down* as they should probably be performed.

The musical score for Figure 2 consists of two staves, both labeled 'Tr.'. The lyrics are:  
 Top staff: where is thy zeal thy zeal and thy strength thy zeal and thy strength  
 Bottom staff: where is thy zeal thy zeal and thy

Can this assertion be justified if the prime source gives the Treble parts as in Figure 1 above? I believe it can. *Six Anthems*, although a handsome volume, is not error-free. Shaw corrects a couple of minor errors in the organ part of *O Lord, look down*<sup>25</sup> and the source incorrectly

<sup>24</sup> In *Six Anthems*, the stems of the B flats of the Tr II part in bar 40 go up. They go down (as shown here) in *Shaw*.

<sup>25</sup> *Shaw*, pp. 6 and 12.

states that the text comes from the 5<sup>th</sup> verse of the 63<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Isaiah (it actually comes from the 15<sup>th</sup> verse).<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, it would seem that the editor, John Page, wanted *Six Anthems* to be a generous tribute to his late friend and therefore did not scrimp on paper. A recurring feature throughout the publication is the provision of additional staves where vocal parts divide, rather than putting both lines on the same staff. This occurs even when, for much of the system (or, in some instances, even the whole page), the two divided voices have the same notes.<sup>27</sup> *O Lord, look down* begins on p. 37 in *Six Anthems*. Here the vocal parts are laid out on four staves, while the organ part is on two. At the top of p. 40, where we find bar 38 of *O Lord, look down*, an additional vocal line suddenly appears in the score because the Treble part divides for the first time. A clue as to why Page misread the divided Treble parts and allocated the Treble I part of bars 38-41/beat 2 to Treble II is found on the title-page, where the editor states that the music contained in the volume comes ‘from the Original Manuscript in his Possession’. This seems to indicate that his source was Battishill’s autograph(s): not part-books or performing scores. Had Page used part-books, or a score that had been used for performance, it would probably have been perfectly clear to which voice each note belonged. In the composer’s manuscript, however, this may not have been the case. First, Battishill was probably rather less extravagant with his paper than Page, and it is very unlikely that he would have been in the habit of wasting his time copying out identical parts on two staves where a voice was not divided. Secondly, since this is the first point in the anthem where any of the voices divide, it is likely that Battishill had been working with just four vocal staves. Although *O Lord, look down* is a contrapuntal work, it is conceived harmonically; and, to no small degree, the vocal lines are designed to realise the chords that give the music its sense of direction.<sup>28</sup> In support of this we may cite the presence of the bass figures in *Six Anthems*.<sup>29</sup> The figured bass may have been in the manuscript because the composer used it to plan the harmonic progressions in advance of composing the contrapuntal lines. Figure 3 shows how the passage in question may have in the composer’s manuscript (the figures below the bass are those given in *Six Anthems*).

---

<sup>26</sup> Errors and omissions in other pieces in *Six Anthems* are not considered here – though examples could be cited.

<sup>27</sup> In the case of *O Lord, look down*, only on its last page in the source (p. 45 of *Six Anthems*) are both treble parts written on the same staff. In this instance, the Trebles are divided for just the first four bars of the page: after that, they sing the same line together again. The Contra Tenors and Tenors, on the other hand, are divided throughout the last page and are given two staves each. With six vocal lines to accommodate (Tr, CT I, CT II, T I, T II, B), plus the two staves of the organ part, Page could not cram in an additional Treble staff, and so the Trebles are forced to share their staff on this occasion.

<sup>28</sup> This is, of course, in contrast to contrapuntal choral music of the Renaissance period, where harmonies are typically the by-product of the counterpoint.

<sup>29</sup> They are redundant because the organ part is fully ‘realised’. Both Martin and Shaw omit the figures from their editions since they serve no practical purpose.

**Figure 3:** Bars 38-44 of Battishill’s *O Lord, look down* as they may have appeared in Battishill’s manuscript.

The musical score for Figure 3 consists of five staves. The top staff is for Tenor (Tr.), the second for Contra Tenor (C.T.), the third for Treble (T.), the fourth for Bass (B.), and the fifth for Organ (Org.). The lyrics are: "where... is thy zeal thy zeal... and thy strength thy zeal... and thy strength". The organ part includes fingering numbers: 4 5, # 6, 5 6, 9 8, 7 5, 5 6, 5 4, 3 5, 5 6, 5 4, 6.

As the speculative reconstruction given in Figure 3 shows, John Page, seeing the stems of the notes of the Treble part going down in bars 38-41/beat 2, assumed that these notes belonged to Treble II – though one only has to look at (or, better still, listen to) the organ part to understand Battishill’s true intentions.<sup>30</sup>

In the penultimate paragraph of his *Memoirs* Busby identifies the key features of Battishill’s music: ‘a peculiar strength of Idea, great force and justness of expression a masterly disposition, and a happy contrivance in the parts.’ I hope that this article has awoken or renewed readers’ interests in the fine music of Jonathan Battishill; and I also hope that, when they perform his masterpiece *O Lord, look down from Heaven*, they will amend the divided Treble parts in bars 38-44 so that there may indeed be the ‘happy contrivance in the parts’ that the composer surely intended.

<sup>30</sup> Battishill may have decided to create a Treble II part after he had entered the Treble notes of bars 38-40. The music remains harmonically complete from bar 41/beat 2 to bar 44 without the Contra Tenor (CT): that is to say, the CT phrase is decorative rather than functional. Thus, in an earlier draft, the Tr II part may have been given to the CT, and Battishill may have later given the imitative material to the lower Treble voice when he decided to decorate the texture with the florid CT phrase. Although it is decorative rather than functional, The CT phrase adds significantly to the growing excitement in the music, not least by its syncopated entry at bar 37/beat 2.