

Printed music before 1801 in the Alexander Turnbull Library

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Approximately eighty items of pre-1801 printed music, illustrating the range of music printing activity from its inception in about 1473 until the end of the eighteenth century, are held in the collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library. There is a particular strength in items printed in the British Isles, as might be expected given the Library's interest in early printed books and English literature. Other items include examples from one of the great music presses of Venice in the first decades of the sixteenth century, and from the Parisian firm of Ballard, whose music publishing activities spanned three centuries.

The strength in British imprints deserves particular mention. Most strongly represented are the publications from the London firm of John Walsh, whose influence on music publishing in the first half of the eighteenth century was overwhelming. These Walsh items include many examples of the music of Handel, whose association with Walsh was a major reason for the latter's success, and five items represent the work of the successors to John Walsh's business. There is one example of the work of the first of the 'commercial' English music publishers, John Playford, with another from his successor Henry Playford. Single items are held exemplifying the work of other important eighteenth century English music publishers such as Robert Bremner, John Cox, William Smith, Peter Welcker, Richard Meares, and Robert Birchall, all of whom, however, were overshadowed by Walsh in the first half of the century. John Watts, a principal publisher of the ballad opera genre which enjoyed a huge success for several of the decades of the eighteenth century, is represented by a number of items. Several holdings illustrate work from Edinburgh, another main centre of British music publishing.

The history of music printing is dominated by the search for suitable techniques to cater for the special needs of music notation. Between 1513 and 1800, the period encompassed by Turnbull's holdings, there were many changes in music notation and in the needs and the intentions of both the composer and the audience. Music printing reflects these changes through its application of different technologies at different periods. The earliest music printers dealt primarily with liturgical music and with the short musical