# Joseph Antonia Emidy: Encounters, not Silhouettes

**By Berta Joncus**

If you google Joseph Emidy, or look him up on *Oxford Music Online*, you'll find this story about him: [1] Born around 1770, he was kidnapped from Guinea as a child, and sold to Portuguese slave traders who took him to Brazil. As a youth, he was brought to Lisbon, where he obtained music instruction and became a violinist at one of Lisbon's official theatres staging opera.[2] His race and musicianship made him prey in June 1795 to Captain Sir Edward Pellew (Fig. 1) whose frigate had docked near Lisbon: Pellew needed a ship's fiddler, had Emidy abducted, and for four years kept him captive on board to play for his crew (Fig. 2). Finally freed in Cornwall when Pellew's command changed, Emidy established himself locally as a leading violinist, composer and music teacher. In 1802 he married a white Englishwoman named Jennifer Hutchings, with whom he raised five children.[3]

Emidy's story, in this version, progresses from enslavement as an African to assimilation and social advancement. But why doesn't Emidy's music survive, either in print or copied manuscripts? I suspect that the answer is 'racism', and that this answer has been passed over because Emidy's story has been told only by white men, several of whom were clearly well-meaning. Emidy did, however, write his own English press notices. Analysing

[1] Most sources, including my own paper, are indebted to Richard McGrady, *Music and Musicians in Early Nineteenth-Century Cornwall: The World of Joseph Emidy – Slave, Violinist and Composer* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 1991).

[2] He may have played at four official theatres: The Royal Palace Theatre, the Academia da Trinidade, the Teatro do Bairro Alto and from 1793 S. Carlos. All offered opera and ballet, Manuel Carlos de Brito, 'Calendars and Details of Operatic Performances', *Opera in Portugal in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989, repr. 2007), pp. 69–76.

[3]McGrady identifies records for Emidy's marriage on September 16 and for Emidy's six children, five who survived into adulthood: Joseph (b. 23 July 1803), Thomas Hutchins (b. 6 July 1805), James Hutchings [sic] (b. 13 July 1808), Cecilia Hutchins (b. 21 October 1809), Benjamin (b. 24 June 1812, d. 3 August 1812), Richard (b. c1815). See also, John Ley Kempthorne, *Falmouth Parish Church* (Falmouth: Cornish EchoCo. [1928]), ****.**

them, I ask: how did he seek to represent himself? What were his challenges? Can Emidy's career show us new ways to explore music history? I think it can.

My approach to Emidy has been informed by the visual artist Kara Walker, and her interrogation of how black histories are told. Styling her subjects after 19th-century silhouettes, she shows them mid-action, and often in horrific scenes (Fig. 3). In order to decode what's happening, Walker forces the viewer to recognize racial profiling. In our turn, if we can see Emidy as an exoticized silhouette – that is, an absence outlined by white space – we can better appreciate the prejudices he faced, which include his being treated as a thrilling exception.

After his1799 release from Pellew's ship, Emidy found himself in Falmouth, Cornwall. As a black man, he must have stood out: the slave trade, and its concomitant creation of black Britons, was marginal in Falmouth compared to other British ports (Fig. 4).[4] The provinciality of Falmouth will have helped him: according to memoirists and press notices, he was the only male music teacher there.[5] In advertising himself as a music teacher, Emidy drew attention to the astonishing variety of instruments he commanded: plucked strings (mandolin, English and Spanish guitar), bowed strings (violin, viola, cello), and woodwinds (traverse flute) (Fig. 5.).[6] He also tuned forte pianos, keeping up with Broadwood's latest models to attend clients across the county (Fig. 6). To call Emidy a 'violinist', as dictionaries do, is to ignore his versatility, surely nourished by West African traditions and his cosmopolitan life. He seems to have been a great teacher: James Silk

[4] Kathleen Chater, *Untold Histories: Black People in England and Wales during the Period of the British Slave Trade, c. 1660-1807* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press 2009), p. 28.
[5] The assertion that around 1800 the "only teacher procurable at Falmouth was an African negro named Emidee" is born out by newspaper advertisements. James Silk Buckingham, *Autobiography; including his Voyages, Travels, Adventures, Speculations, Successes and Failures, faithfully and frankly Narrated*, vol. 1 (London: Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1855), p. 166: cited also in McGrady, *Music and Musicians*, p. 40.
[6] All notices cited below are from the Royal Cornwall Gazette, a journal printed each Saturday from henceforth referred to as RCG. For Emidy's music lesson see for instance RCG 31 July 1802 and 7 Aug 1802 and notices cited below

Buckingham, Emidy's first biographer (Fig. 7), came to him without previous experience to learn flute, and reportedly played a concerto solo after six months.[7]

But Emidy was above all a virtuoso and composer, relying like his peers on his annual benefit performance to prove his mettle. At a benefit, a performer could secure a large portion of an annual income, and also accrue cultural capital. Where you performed, the works you programmed, which fellow artists donated their talents, and who your patrons were – these represented the performer within the public sphere. From August 1802, when he announced his very first "Grand MISCELLANEOUS CONCERT" (Fig. 8), to his last extant benefit notice of 1826, Emidy showed his deftness in self-promotion. So, for his 1802 concert he played music that he had composed for "GUITAR" and "MANDOLIN" which, as he informed readers of his press notice, he taught in a "most easy and elegant Stile" (Fig. 8). After playing one part of a duet he had composed for guitar and violin, Emidy then executed his own violin concerto, followed by his solo mandolin work. Between these numbers, Emidy programmed fashionable symphonies by Ernst Eichner – a bassoonist and symphonist who had worked in London in 1773 – and Carl Stamitz, whose London residency from 1778 to 1780 had brought him fame. From 1802 onwards, Emidy normally announced his patrons; in 1802, these were 'several respectable Gentleman' (see Fig. 8).

This is what Falmouth had to offer Emidy: music as a gentlemanly occupation. Around 1800 amateur 'Harmonic Societies' sprouted in several Cornish towns as polite men sought to improve their taste, their musical knowledge, and – at least in the case of Silk Buckingham – their chances with women.[8] At such gatherings, as we can see in the only

[7] "I placed myself under his tuition for an hour's daily lesson under his own eye, and four hours' daily practice besides … in two months I was perfectly competent to play any accompaniment to the piano … and in six to play Hoffmeister's Grand Concerto in D, with full orchestral accompaniments, which I did with great eclat in … the Town Hall, Buckingham, *Autobiography*, p. 166; cited also in McGrady, *Music and Musicians*, p. 42.

[8] 'During this period I began the study of music, finding it a most agreeable recommendation in female society, of which I was always fond' Buckingham, *Autobiography*, p. 166; cited also in McGrady, *Music and Musicians*, p. 42.

known portrait of Emidy (Fig. 9), groups would be led by a professional to absorb both classics and current music. Emidy was concert master of the 'Harmonic Society' first of Falmouth,[9] and from 1804 of the more important centre, Truro, where he resided from about 1812.[10] In both towns, we must imagine Emidy directing public as well as private gatherings of white male musicians (Fig. 10). Emidy also secured visiting militia bands, Wiltshire and North Devon as well as the Cornish Militia, to bolster Harmonic Society concerts that he led. Besides professionalism, militia players enriched the ensemble's forces with their instruments: clarinet, oboe, horns, bassoons, a trumpet, percussion, and often a serpent (Fig. 11).[11]

Through his benefits, and the announcements of them, Emidy could emphasise that he, too was a Briton. This will have been important because he wasn't just black but, with his Portuguese background, almost certainly Catholic as well. The latter identity he had shed by 1802, wedding Jennifer that year in Falmouth's Anglican King Charles Church, where they later had their children baptised.[12] In 1808, Emidy gifted the "Gentlemen of the Truro Harmonic Club" a violin concerto that he had "composed purposely" for a birthday celebration honouring King George III that the Gentlemen had organized (Fig. 12). Emidy, like his peers, typically closed his benefit concerts with "God save the King" (Fig. 13). And by 1813, Emidy landed a coup for his benefits: annual patronage of Cornwall's foremost peer, Edward Boscawen, Viscount and later Earl of Falmouth (Fig. 14 and Fig. 15). The Viscount's patronage spoke for both Emidy's first-order artistry *and* his fealty to the Church

[9] Buckingham says there were 'monthly concerts of the Harmonic Society of Falmouth, held at the Town Hall' Buckingham, *Autobiography*, p. 166.
[10] McGrady, *Music and Musicians*, p. 72.
[11] 'The Band of the 1st Devon Militia', Herbert, Trevor and Barlow, Helen (2008) The Cultures of Brass Project, http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/cultures-of-brass, [30.9.18]. URL: http://www.open.ac.uk/Arts/cultures-of-brass/military/diary/militia-band.htm [The Diary of a Victorian Military Bandsman: The band of the 1st Devon Militia]
[12] See note above. Emidy's last child was baptised in Truro. On the church's history, see John Ley Kempthorne, *Falmouth Parish Church* (Falmouth: "Cornish Echo" Co. [1928]).

of England: the Viscount was virulently anti-Catholic, leading opposition in the House of Lords to the Roman Catholic Relief Act of 1829.[13] With the Viscount's backing, attendance at Emidy's benefit became a sort of who's-who of Cornwall's gentry, as one report shows (Fig. 16).

But what of the obstacles Emidy faced? Surely, with his prodigious gifts, he should have quit Truro for London? In 1880 local writer William Tuck recalled, 'though I have had the privilege of listening to most of the stars who have appeared on the London stage during the past fifty years, but not one of them in my estimation has equalled this unknown negro'.[14] Recognizing Emidy's world-class talent, Buckingham went Johann Salomon (Fig. 17), the famous fixer for Haydn, to set up London concerts for Emidy (Fig. 18):

> On my first leaving Falmouth to come to London [1810?] I brought with me several of [Emidy's] pieces in MS. … I sought an interview with [Salomon], and … asked him to get some of Emidy's pieces tried …. a quartett, a quintett, and two symphonies with full accompaniments were tried, and all were highly approved … Mr. Saloman [suggested] that Emidee should come to London and give a public performance … but all the others [present] thought his colour would be so much against him, that there would be a great risk of failure … To show, however, their admiration … they originated on the spot a private subscription … for about a week among others of the profession not then present … which I had great pleasure in transmitting to Emidy, with several complimentary letters from those who had been present at the performance of his compositions.[15]

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[13] Reynolds, K. D. 2004 "Boscawen, Edward, first earl of Falmouth (1787–1841), politician." Oxford Dictionary of National Biography. 30 Sep. 2018. http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-2932.

[14] Reminiscences of Camborne - William Tuck, c.1880cambornechapelschurchjoseph-emidyminingschools page revision: 3, last edited: 29 Oct 2011, 14:11 (2510 days ago). Accessed 30.9.18

[15] Buckingham, *Autobiography*, pp. 170-71.

Thus stymied, Emidy pursued fame via print. On 31 August 1811 he announced (Fig. 19):

> Mr Emidy proposes to publish a set of GRAND SINFONIAS, adapted for a full Orchestra; but as the expence of engraving the Plates will far exceed the means for accomplishing it without assistance, he humbly solicits the Subscription of the Nobility, Gentry and Public, for Copies of the Work. From the repeated instances of distinguished patronage with which he has been honoured, he is so sanguine as to hope that he shall not be disappointed in again relying upon their favour. The price of the Copy of the Sinfonias will be one Guineau, and the Work, which is to be engraved in the neatest matter, will be sent to the artists as soon as there are Subscribers enough to warrant the undertaking. He could produce ample testimonies from Amateurs and the Professing in this County, did not the approval of Mr. Salomon, leader of the Hanover-square Concerts, and of Mr. [Robert] Lindley, the celebrated Violincellist, render such unnecessary to stamp the character of the composition.

But the local gentry didn't react – instancing precisely the kind of 'failure' predicted by the star London musicians who had admired Emidy's music, but not enough to think it could overcome his blackness. And I think Emidy was even harassed at his benefit of 19 December 1818– how else can one interpret this report? (Fig. 20):

> We cannot help noticing that the usual decorum of a public assembly … was not on this occasion observed in the gallery. The sound of a penny trumpet may be very well to amuse children or boys in a fair … If the person who so indecently annoyed the company during the performance of some of the finest pieces of music be indeed ignorant of the elements of good behaviour .. his ease is pitiable

At that performance, audiences were treated to the 'beautiful variations of that pleasing air, "The Blue Bells of Scotland" compos'd by Emidy' (Fig. 21) who demonstrated a 'taste and affect … scarcely to be expected at so great a distance' from London. Was this the fine piece

that set off the heckler? With his composition, Emidy had laid claim to a favourite song of former playhouse star and king's mistress Dorothea Jordan (Fig. 22 and Figs. 23-24), who had sparked a fashion for variations on this tune.[16] Whether or not contentious, "The Blue Bells of Scotland" remains one piece by which a virtuoso of today, such as Tunde, might meditate on Emidy's virtuosity [Tunde plays].

This leads to the last question with which I opened this paper – how to try and account for lost musical voices. Historical musicology relies, and often defines itself by, material culture: an absence of scores, sources, or transmissions leaves scholars empty-handed. Here I'd again like to consider Kara Walker and her disturbing counter-narratives. For Walker, stories say more about the speaker than they do about the subject. This rings true of Buckingham's account of Emidy. Buckingham was what we'd today call an activist, travelling to champion the rights of the repressed, in India and North America, as well as in Britain (Fig. 25).[17] As Buckingham put it, he could "never find anything in a defective state without feeling an instinctive desire to improve it".[18]

Emidy's gravestone of 1835 was effectively his last public statement, according to which 'he was a native of PORTUGAL' (Fig. 26). But twenty years after Emidy died, the aging Buckingham wrote that Emidy was born 'in Guinea … sold into slavery to some Portuguese traders, taken by them to the Brazils when quite a boy, and ultimately came to

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[16]The "Blue Bells of Scotland," [the melody by D. Jordan,] adapted with variations by J. Hammond. London : Printed & sold by the Author [1813]; The Blue Bells of Scotland with Variations for the Harp or Piano Forte, etc Duchatz, W[enceslaus] London : S. Tilley [1800];n The Blue Bells of Scotland [by D. Jordan] with Variations for the Piano Forte. / [By Rimbault, S. F. (Stephen Francis) 1773-1837.] London : Phipps & Co [c. 1815]. Sonata for the Piano Forte, with an accompaniment for the Flute, in which is introduced the "Blue Bells of Scotland" [the melody by Mrs. D. Jordan]. Op. 8 [or rather, Op. 7. No. 2] London, [1815]; The favorite air Blue bells of Scotland / arranged with variations for the harp, with an accompaniment for the flute by Henry Nicholson. London : Printed for Whitaker & Co. [between 1819 and 1824]

[17] 2004 "Buckingham, James Silk (1786–1855)." *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. 13 Oct. 2018. http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.libraries.london.ac.uk/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-1007497.

[18] James Silk Buckingham, *Mr. Buckingham's Defence of his Public and Private Character* (London: John Blackwell, 1832), p. 157; cited also in ODNB article above.

Lisbon with his owner or master',[19] and this is what you read about Emidy on *Oxford Music Online*. I think this untrue. From 1761 to 1786, slaves were embarked at the Upper Guinean ports controlled by Portugal – Cacheu and Bissau – usually to work Brazil's northern Maranhão rice planations and Pernambuco sugar plantations.[20] How could Emidy have acquired his prodigious and wide-ranging skills by 1795 if he had come to Lisbon as a former slave? Far likelier, I think, is that Emidy was born and raised in Lisbon – an estimated one-fifth of its population was coloured – perhaps in the Macambo, a quarter for Lisbon's African and labour population.[21] Here he could have absorbed West African and European court musical practices; here, his genius might have found early sponsorship among the Portuguese nobility, which often made young black boys into fashion icons for their households (Fig. 27). I think Buckingham fabricated Emidy the African slave to better tell his own abolitionist story. In any case, for information about Emidy's origins, surely we should consider his testimony, or that of the family he left behind, more seriously than Buckingham's? That we haven't done so tells us more about ourselves than about Emidy.

To gauge the contributions of Emidy and other gifted musicians who have left no archival trace, could we not tell music history from the perspective of encounters, like Emidy's? Following his journey, we could synthesize ethnomusicology and transatlantic slave studies to consider possible musical practices in the Macambo. We could sample Lisbon operas that Emidy almost certainly performed, comparing them to the kind of hornpipes and jigs he will have played during his four-year internment on Pellew's ship. To

[19] Buckingham, *Autobiography*, p.167.
[20] Herbert S. Klein and Francisco Vidal Luna, *Slavery in Brazil* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010) pp. 80-83.
[21] "An English observer in the 1770s estimated that 'about one fifth of the inhabitants of Lisbon consists of blacks, mulattoes, or of some intermediate tint of black and white'. This figure is probably very close to being accurate". James H. Sweet, 'The Hidden Histories of African Lisbon', *The Black Urban Atlantic in the Age of the Slave Trade* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), p. 236. On musical practices in the Macambo, see *Ibid*., 243-46.

appreciate Emidy's artistry, we could analyse the masterpieces he led in his Cornwall concerts, and speculate – through composition, improvisation and performance – what his solo compositions might have been like. Such a history could push aside the obstructions Emidy himself faced to more directly engage today's students, who rightly demand that we map music's history more broadly, more precisely, and more inclusively.