A Place for Music: 
John Nash, Regent Street and the Philharmonic Society of London

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On 6 February 1813 a bold and imaginative group of music professionals, thirty in number, established the Philharmonic Society of London. Many had competed directly against each other in the heady commercial environment of late eighteenth-century London—setting up orchestras, promoting concerts, performing and publishing music, selling instruments, teaching. Their avowed aim in the new century, radical enough, was to collaborate rather than compete, creating one select organization with an instrumental focus, self-governing and self-financed, that would put love of music above individual gain. Among their remarkable early rules were these: that low and high sectional positions be of equal rank in their orchestra and shared by rotation, that no Society member be paid for playing at the group’s concerts, that large musical works featuring a single soloist be forbidden at the concerts, and that the Society’s managers be democratically elected every year. Even the group’s chosen name stressed devotion to a harmonious body, coining an English usage—phil-harmonic—that would later mean simply ‘orchestra’ the world over.

At the start it was agreed that the Society’s chief vehicle should be a single series of eight public instrumental concerts of the highest quality, mounted during the London season, February or March to June, each year. By cooperation among their fee-paying members, they hoped to achieve not only exciting performances but, crucially, artistic continuity and a steady momentum for fine music that had been impossible before, notably in the era of the high-profile Professional Concert of 1785-93 and rival Salomon–Haydn Concert of 1791-2, 1794 and Opera Concert of 1795. In effect their first goal was to create and sustain a single expert London orchestra, presenting the best classical and modern repertory to discriminating subscribers on a regular basis. That goal was soon reached and long maintained, as successive histories of the Society—from 1912, Royal Philharmonic Society (RPS)—show. What the histories have never explained is why musical brotherhood should have broken out when it did among those first thirty individuals. Most were pre-eminent musicians used to vigorous rivalry—top players but also singers and organists, instructors, composers and

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businessmen working in the most open, potentially lucrative, music marketplace on earth.\(^2\) What could possibly have motivated their show of coordinated selflessness, and why suddenly in February 1813?\(^3\)

The Society’s own explanation of its background and timing was simple if a little vague, pleading the case for musical rescue. Asserting a need to restore the great orchestral repertory of earlier London instrumental concerts said to have fallen into ‘neglect’, the Philharmonic prospectus also referred to a desire to rekindle the public taste for such excellence, now ‘latent’ for ‘many years past’.\(^4\) Although details were lacking, the clear implication is that the wonderful orchestral and chamber works of Joseph Haydn, Ignace Pleyel, J. C. Bach, C. F. Abel, W. A. Mozart and others – admired from concerts in the 1780s and 90s – had fallen in esteem since 1800; and moreover that similar, newer works – symphonies by Ludwig van Beethoven, for example – were not being performed enough in current London series, those devoted to Handel’s and other old music, or to English and Italian vocal music.\(^5\) In short, the Society’s framers couched their claim as an aesthetic and institutional critique, highlighting a gap in London music provision that the new organization would fill. After long periods of its success, commentators naturally tended to accept and reinscribe this idea of ‘orchestral destitution’ before 1813, or else to challenge it through close study, showing that the supposed orchestral decline around 1800 was much overstated, even a myth (without, however, suggesting a viable explanation for any myth-making).\(^6\) Either way, though, and whatever the degree of continuity or change, the Society’s hazy founding has always taken second place to its distinguished achievement over two centuries, including its commissioning of new music, now an honour roll of remarkable works.\(^7\) Any other motivation behind the founding, perhaps linked to wider Regency politics or culture for example, would appear to be irrelevant.

In the Royal Philharmonic Society’s bicentenary year of 2013, however, a fresh look at origins is surely apt. Research seeking to clarify the Society’s history and value should benefit from its impressive archive, owned by the nation since late 2002 and now incorporated in British Library collections as RPS MSS. 1-271. The Society’s administrative files and letters were placed on loan in 1962 and incorporated as Loan 48, with minor additions later: these are now RPS MSS. 272-417.\(^8\) Whether through

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\(^2\) The Society did not itself constitute a full orchestra; horn players, bassoonists, trumpeters and oboists, for example, were not originally allowed as members (W. T. Parke, *Musical Memoirs* (London, 1830), vol. ii, p. 160). Nor did it ever maintain one on more than an *ad hoc* annual basis, despite later assumptions to the contrary, notably in mid twentieth-century conflations of Thomas Beecham’s Royal Philharmonic Orchestra with the Society’s name and reputation. Its chief identity from 1813 to 1988 was as a promoter of orchestral concerts.

\(^3\) Quoted in Foster, *History*, p. 4, repeated in Elkin, *Royal Philharmonic*, pp. 11-12. For two original prospectuses giving the Society’s aims and rules, see the first volume of Sir George Smart’s collection of Philharmonic programmes (BL, K.6.d.3).

\(^4\) Notably at the Concert of Ancient Music from 1776 (under aristocratic management; no music less than twenty years old), and the Vocal Concert of 1792-5 (featuring songs and glee; revived in 1801 with orchestra). A new series aligning itself so overtly with instrumental music was also, by definition, projecting distinctiveness from opera house culture, including patrician influence.


\(^6\) To name a few: Beethoven, Symphony no. 9 in D minor, ‘Choral’ (commissioned 1822, finished 1824); Mendelssohn, Symphony no. 4 in A, ‘Italian’ (1833); Dvořák, Symphony no. 7 in D minor (1885); Saint-Saëns, Symphony no. 3 in C minor, ‘Organ’ (1866); Vaughan Williams, Symphony no. 9 in E minor (1958); Lutosławski, Cello Concerto (1970).

\(^7\) Selected manuscript scores were placed in the British Museum in 1914 and incorporated as Loan 4, with the remaining scores added in 1982, by then to the British Library: these are now RPS MSS. 1-271. The Society’s administrative files and letters were placed on loan in 1962 and incorporated as Loan 48, with minor additions later: these are now RPS MSS. 272-417.
primary work on the Society’s original scores, careful use of Directors’ Minute Books or access to hundreds of autograph letters by renowned composers, performers and agents, the archive offers unique insight into some of the most important British and European music-making of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. At the same time, like any corporate archive this one can disappoint by its sheer routineness. Brief or cryptic references to important matters alternate with extended remarks on minor ones; dozens of names, big and small, punctuate the tedium of organizing concerts and member elections. Rather than thick history, the archive offers thin chronology, one season following another tinted by the occasional celebrity scandal or crisis in finance. Meanwhile holes in the record can frustrate, although particular gaps might be suggestive: no Directors’ Minutes survive from before 1816, for example, and a clear break between May and December 1818 characterizes the shape of that first Directors’ book.8 In these cases, private papers of key Philharmonic members, press reports, government and public records, printed music, music journals and concert programmes, even maps and drawings, might supply clues.

As it happens, evidence from that very mix of materials leads to an unexpected reason for the outward show of professional harmony in early 1813, revealing, indeed, a parallel universe of action and intent behind the Philharmonic Society that has been lost to official history. This new evidence, set out here with a reconstructed narrative for the first time, not only explains mysterious gaps and murky references in the RPS archive and in members’ correspondence; it also deepens modern understanding of what the Society was about and what its founders aimed to achieve. Centring on the unlikely venue chosen for the Society’s concerts – the Argyll Rooms, Little Argyll Street – this version of events incorporates several new claims, as follows. The extensive Marylebone estate development in central London, what we know as Regent’s Park and Regent Street, directed from 1811 by the architect John Nash (1752-1835), almost certainly provided the spark that set the Philharmonic Society going. Nash personally acted as liaison for the Society to ensure a suite of public assembly rooms was built under Crown protection on the striking new street. Through this arrangement he secured a beautiful, purpose-designed performance space, an eye-catching rounded corner and dome, a long colonnaded commercial frontage, and an additional picturesque vista for the street including a slight bend just below Oxford Circus (still there), all with one premier building. The Society gained stunning modern premises for what they hoped would become an authoritative national institution embracing their concerts and much more – an official Royal Academy of Music on the model of the Royal Academy of Arts. Entrepreneurial individual members captured a stake in a London property market that is still one of the most profitable on earth. And the Prince Regent, by identifying with the Philharmonic Society at its start, not only helped propel modern classical music to a supreme position in British cultural life but also won some much-needed public regard, helping to defray his otherwise debauched personal reputation in the years leading up to his reign as George IV.

As will be seen, events in this complex chain of activity from 1812 to 1830 did not always go to plan. Improvisation ruled; harmony did not last. Yet the Rooms still got built, the Philharmonic concerts went on splendidly, and Society members projected a range of endeavours for their new home befitting the place of high musical culture in an advanced European capital. Despite unforeseen difficulties – not least a disastrous fire in 1830 – it was a beginning that set in motion two centuries of aesthetic and professional progress for music and musicians in Britain. Placing the start of this important body in a truer light, moreover, revealing myriad real contingencies and several unmet goals, helps to explain the Society’s conservatism and strong risk aversion later,9 in turn setting the stage for spectacular independent orchestral developments in late

8 The first Directors’ Minute Book runs from 8 April 1816 to 21 June 1822 (RPS MS. 279). For the gap between 31 May and 1 December 1818, see ff. 56-7, a join between two separate notebooks. Minutes of the General Meetings begin only in December 1813 (RPS MS. 275).

9 A drop in performance quality, parsimony over rehearsals and a general lack of enterprise and energy in Philharmonic programme-building would be noticed repeatedly over the middle and later years of the nineteenth century; see Ehrlich, op cit., pp. 41-157, passim.
nineteenth- and early twentieth-century London. Dispelling the early foundational haze, meanwhile, uncovers flesh-and-blood human beings, conflicting ambitions, and a story that makes deeper intellectual sense in the long arc of British musical history.

Before looking in detail at the Argyll Rooms project, we should first absorb the sweep and inventiveness of John Nash’s larger concept, above all the ‘royal mile’ linking Regent’s Park with Carlton House, the Regent’s home.

Nash and the New Street

Nash’s designs for rural Marylebone Park and the proposed new roadway through town, executed between 1811 and 1826, were only part of what would turn out to be the grandest, most systematic redevelopment central London has ever seen; St James’s Park, Whitehall and Trafalgar Square were also soon involved (fig. 1). This unparalleled thrust in metropolitan improvement arose from the conjunction of two coincidental events early in 1811 – the reversion to Crown ownership of the 500-acre Marylebone estate from private leaseholds, and the official declaration of the Regency. Although completely unrelated, together they had a powerful effect.

From as early as 1793, the expected acquisition of so much valuable land on the city’s northwestern edge had exercised government officials: the potential for building here, hence for raising land revenues at a time of great wartime expenditure, was vast, while the need for careful planning of affiliated transport, markets, water supply, sewerage and social development was essential. But decision-making proceeded slowly. Not until late 1810, after several written reports, the offer of a cash reward for bright ideas, and a merger of the two relevant administrative offices for Crown property – Woods and Forests, and Land Revenues – did Commissioners tell government architects to get on with the job and submit firm plans. One of those architects was Nash, attached since 1806 to the Office of Woods and Forests. His ideas in March 1811 (revised in August) included a canal system, suburban villas within parkland, a double circus (inner and outer park ring roads), and a new thoroughfare running south from the park via the fashionable wide street known as Portland Place. Even without the strong stimulus of park development, a new road cutting down through the densely built-up streets south of Oxford Street was badly needed. In the event, all of Nash’s ideas, practical and aesthetic, sprang from his shrewd analysis of the full planning problem, taking in social divisions and scenic considerations as much as effective connecting points for traffic flow. According to his biographer John Summerson, Nash explained his scheme so convincingly – ‘a masterpiece of insight and commonsense’ – that it was approved by the Treasury in October 1811 and preferred above every other submission. Already in September the Prince Regent had seen Nash’s plans and expressed enthusiasm. In June 1812 these were made public for the first time: observers could at last see the scope and

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10 George, Prince of Wales, was installed as Regent in February 1811. In July 1811 his father’s insanity was finally admitted to be incurable. The limitations on the Regency were removed in February 1812, making the Prince king in all but name. For the relevance to Nash’s career, see John Summerson, The Life and Work of John Nash, Architect (London, 1980), pp. 90-1.
11 Ibid., pp. 58-60. The most recent and thorough exploration of this topic is J. Mordaunt Crook, ‘John Nash and the Genesis of Regent’s Park’, in Geoffrey Tyack (ed.), John Nash: Architect of the Picturesque (Swindon, 2013), pp. 75-100. Crook shows Nash arriving late on the scene of metropolitan improvement but, through his political savvy, intuition and genius for opportunity, achieving the ‘urban picturesque’.
12 Summerson, op. cit., p. 76.
13 Ibid., p. 71. It was Thomas Moore who in October reported the Regent as ‘so pleased with this magnificent plan that he has been heard to say “it will quite eclipse Napoleon”’.
Fig. 1. Nash’s ‘Metropolitan Improvements’ from Regent’s Park to Charing Cross, drawn by John Newenham Summerson. The areas in solid black represent Nash’s work to 1835. From John Summerson, Georgian London (London, 1988). By kind permission of the National Churches Trust.
imagine the impact of the physical change that was coming. In print the architect set out his rationale according to three categories of benefit – public usefulness, aesthetic beauty and profitability for the Crown. Improved passage for the capital’s ever-increasing traffic, for example, including professionals and MPs going from northern suburban districts and the best squares down to parliament and back again, was a key part of Nash’s thinking. So too was the joining of fashion with commerce in one long, wide, north-south artery that was to be not only formal and modern but revenue-producing, with a variety of up-market tenants and frontages – private houses, shops, churches, galleries, arcaded opera house at the south end, public building in the middle, and All Souls, Langham Place at the north terminus. Following the social distinctions of existing neighbourhoods, Nash took care to separate the ‘bad streets’ of Soho, to the east, from those of the nobility and gentry further west, and to create a street line that would avoid destruction of desirable property while keeping the government’s bill for compensation of purchased property to a minimum. A particularly striking feature favoured by Nash was a colonnade along the full length of the New Street (as it was called from 1812), on both sides, from Oxford Circus down to the proposed square before Carlton House. Shown by dots on his first plan, the colonnade would function both as rain cover for pedestrians and, so Nash imagined, a stimulus to social interaction. In addition, he stressed the appeal of long vistas at different points along the way, of monuments or statues in the centre of crossing streets, and friezes, circular temple-shapes and beautiful façades strategically placed (fig. 2).

Practical execution was a different matter, however, and relied on engineering, interpersonal and problem-solving skills, all under shifting conditions, that would have challenged the most able project manager. Nash had those qualities in spades (fig. 3). A natural politician who had tried but failed to enter parliament, he retained a loyalty to the Prince that aided communication with courtiers; by 1812 he was not only a favoured architect at Carlton House, but someone who could be trusted to advance the Prince’s interests in any sphere. Further, Nash’s experience as domestic architect and surveyor served him well in the roles of valuer, estate agent and financial adviser that were so important where some 780 houses had to be demolished, more than half of them Crown property. Throughout the building period, he kept several funding models in play: from that of a private shareholding company keen to build the canal as a speculative investment, to the securing of a huge loan from the Royal Exchange insurance office, compensating owners whose property had to be compulsorily purchased; from making contracts with private builders for constructing small blocks of houses on a rolling basis (Samuel Baxter, James Burton), to Nash’s own ‘work against work’ system with building tradesmen for the Quadrant, in which little money changed hands but that section of the street could be controlled as virtually a single structure. Behind each arrangement lay Nash’s networking talents and personal enthusiasm. For rather than putting everything out

14 The First Report of the Commissioners of His Majesty’s Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues consists of a 23-page text signed and dated 4 June 1812, with an additional 123 pages of appendixes and indexes (BL., 190.g.3.). Nash’s contribution appears as Appendix 12A, pp. 88-90, illustrated by the folding ‘Plan of a New Street from Charing Cross to Portland Place’ bound in at the back. Early discussion and criticism of Nash’s ideas took place in Parliament; the public would not have been aware of much building activity until after 1815.

15 Nash thought that balustrades above the colonnade would allow residents to lean out and communicate with pedestrians and traffic on the street, adding cheerfulness to the scene. Strong objections were raised that the colonnade would attract unsavoury behaviour and darken the shops. In the end, colonnades were erected only for the Quadrant and even these were taken down in late 1848. See Summerson, op. cit., pp. 77-8.

16 Summerson, op. cit., p. 90.

17 The Quadrant was conceived as a money-saving alternative to Nash’s initial idea of a large square-with-public-building, just above Piccadilly, to make the bottom of New Street line up with Carlton House; it first appeared in his revised plan of mid-1813 and may thus have been directly connected with envisioning the Argyll Rooms as the transposed ‘public building’; see p. 10 and n. 23 below. For Nash’s method of building the Quadrant as five concentric blocks – two on the east side of the street, three on the west – and his ‘work against work’ accounting system, see Summerson, op. cit., pp. 85-7.
Fig. 2. Nash’s original Plan of a New Street from Charing Cross to Portland Place. From First Report of the Commissioners of His Majesty’s Woods, Forests, and Land Revenues, June 1812 (BL, 190.g.3).
Fig. 3. John Nash. Oil painting by Sir Thomas Lawrence, 1827, depicting Nash in his house at no. 14 Regent Street. With permission of The Principal and Fellows of Jesus College, Oxford.
to public tender – either dictating style and taking bids, or allowing a free-for-all among small builders – he actively encouraged interested parties to work out separate schemes for finance and help design their own premises.\(^\text{19}\) Such an approach required constant energy, imagination and flexibility. Nash oiled the machine with his own money, but his persuasive powers and confidence were also by all accounts irresistible. On a day-to-day level he worked as consultant from his home in Dover Street, aided by assistants including the estimable George Repton (a son of Humphry) yet also staying in constant touch with the New Street Commissioners, chiefly Alexander Milne. Colleagues appear to have respected Nash’s expertise and efficiency. Any modern researcher who scours the surviving batches of correspondence with affected householders and tenants, and with the Commissioners, now in the National Archives, can see why in his clear-headed replies.\(^\text{19}\)

This broad description of the project, under Nash’s guidance, goes some way to illustrate Summerson’s likening of the street’s finished character to how it was built – not elegant so much as ‘opportunist, improvisatory and rapid’.\(^\text{20}\) Work on the canal began in late 1812, followed by that on the park. The New Street Act for providing ‘a more convenient Communication from Marylebone Park [...] to Charing Cross’ received the royal assent in July 1813. Notices to property owners along the street’s projected path started going out in mid-1814, with only a few cases requiring arbitration – the Argyll Rooms site being one. The period 1815–17 then saw a general hesitation and some difficulty across the project. Criticism built up. People formerly committed began to back out, and technical trouble arose over the new sewer. But by 1819 progress had resumed, thanks largely to royal favour and Nash’s optimism. The road was named ‘Regent Street’ in January 1819, letting went briskly and by late summer the street had been opened from the southern end as far as Piccadilly. It was at this point that matters came to a head for the Philharmonic Society after more than six years of waiting, all the while presenting their concert season each spring as Nash negotiated on their behalf. He delivered his design for their new premises in August 1819, and building began in earnest that September.

A New Opportunity for Musicians

To imply that John Nash more or less instigated the Philharmonic Society might be going too far, even within a radically revised cultural history of nineteenth-century Britain. Yet there is no doubt that for those first thirty musicians, the prospect of good odds on a central London property investment and, moreover, of professional ‘arrival’ for their collective identity – occupying a prime physical space in a permanent location on the best street in town, with royal approval at the highest level – was a prize worth playing for (literally). What remains to be explained is how Nash’s New Street opportunity came to the musicians’ attention, galvanizing disparate interests and moving key leaders towards a vision of what their new musical society might achieve, including – but not limited to – the highest standards in orchestral programming and performance. Given scarce primary sources and partial or

\(^{18}\) A key early example is the Regent’s Canal Co., which brought together a pre-existing idea by Thomas Homer with Nash’s plans for the Park in 1810. Private finance progressed quickly once Nash hinted at Crown approval and suggested that Homer could submit the plan ‘to such friends as might be induced to promote the undertaking’ (quoted in Summerson, op. cit., p. 68). The first meeting was held in May 1811, when Nash enthused and a return of more than 15 per cent was projected. In August he announced that the Prince would lend his name to the project; by December the subscription list was closed at £200,000 (Summerson, op. cit., pp. 71–2).

\(^{19}\) See, for example, John Nash to Alexander Milne, 19 Dec. 1817, in the National Archives (TNA): Public Record Office (PRO) CRES 26/108, New Street Commissioners: Correspondence, New Street, Argyll Rooms. This particular set of Crown Estate papers consists of two loose bundles of letters and plans, some 80 items in all, covering the period 30 December 1814 to 21 June 1832. The whole of CRES 26, New Street Commissioners’ records relating to the making of Regent Street, comprises 257 boxes and volumes.

confused secondary ones, some of the chronology has to be hypothesized, the background projected; but enough firm evidence exists to suggest a plausible scenario.

A few key points can be clarified at the outset. First, there were two distinct sets of rooms on the site used by the Society – one, a converted 1730s house which gave on to Little Argyll Street, used for the concert seasons 1813 to 1819; the other, replacing the first set, designed on a larger scale by Nash with a long frontage on Regent Street, used for seasons 1820 to 1829. Second, the joint-stock company of ‘twenty-one of the principal professors of music in London’ known as the Regent’s, then Royal, Harmonic Institution (hereafter RHI), said to have commissioned and occupied the new rooms from 1820, was an independent subset of (mostly) Philharmonic Society members, not a completely distinct or unrelated body: a parental relation between the two is central to understanding use of the building as well as operational and aesthetic differences in the 1820s. Third, the usual date cited as the first meeting of the Society’s leading founders, Sunday 24 January 1813, at William Dance’s house in Manchester Street, was in all likelihood the culmination of several exploratory ones that preceded it. For Nash’s timetable, this moment would have been crucial in the group’s ultimate decision whether to take the old Argyll Rooms as a base or not, including financial and legal implications of buying out the putative owner, Henry Francis Greville, and funding a renovation: the architect was now under pressure from the Commissioners to revise his first plan.

Here lies an important clue to Nash’s fundamental involvement. At the time of the Society’s official founding, 6 February 1813, the old Argyll Rooms occupied a site on the corner of Little Argyll Street and King Street that had already been erased by Nash in his then-current design for the New Street (published eight months earlier, on 4 June 1812): he evidently intended this site to be cleared for the street’s wide path, and the existing Rooms to come down (see fig. 2, above). Exactly four and a half weeks after the Philharmonic Society’s founding, by 8 March 1813, Nash’s map had been re-drawn with a slight westerly pivot just below Oxford Circus, preserving Little Argyll Street’s original corner as well as the old venue site and the Rooms themselves; a returning southerly bend just below the entrance to Little Argyll Street then softened the New Street’s original straight line (figs 4a, 4b). How far this gentle bend was meant as picturesque echo of the more dramatic south-easterly curve at the Quadrant further down – itself a striking revision also introduced only by 8 March and meant to replace the large square-with-public-building Nash had once envisaged to line up the street’s lower end with Carlton House – is matter for speculation. Both these late changes contributed to ‘the bending street’ much liked by the Commissioners. And from early on, it seems, the subtle projection at Little Argyll Street drew special care from Nash, who highlighted it with rounded corners on both north and south sides of the little street, a decorative colonnade on the New Street.

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21 For the fullest account of both sets of rooms, see ‘The Argyll Rooms, Little Argyll Street’, in the ‘Argyll Street Area’ chapter of F. H. W. Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London*, vols xxxi and xxxii: *St James, Westminster, Part 2* (London, 1963), pp. 301-6, 336-7, plates 25-7. Sources used include leases and floor plans from public records. A few misapprehensions aside, this account at least sketches any modern notion of the rooms having been located where the western portion of Oxford Street station now stands, an assumption made by Robert Elkin in his *Royal Philharmonic and The Old Concert Rooms of London* (London, 1955), probably from erroneous information in early editions of Grove’s Dictionary of Music and Musicians.

22 See W. H. Husk, ‘Argyll Rooms’, in George Grove (ed.), *A Dictionary of Music and Musicians* (London, 1879-89), vol. i, p. 82. Husk relied on material from William Ayrton in the *Harmonicon* (1830), and usefully mentioned both the Philharmonic Society and RHI without, however, explaining any link between them. Unfortunately Husk’s location for the Rooms confused both Argyll Street and Argyll Place for Little Argyll Street. For more on the RHI, see pp. 26-31 below.

23 Soon after the *First Report* of mid-1812, the Commissioners had asked Nash to reconsider his (rather expensive) original plan and provide further ideas. He offered two additional plans, including one with a quadrant replacing the square to make a ‘bending street’. This was eventually preferred because it was attractive (‘resembling [...] the High-street at Oxford’), cheaper to build and would produce the largest revenue in relation to expenditure. See Summerson, op. cit., pp. 79-80.
Fig. 4a. Map detail of Argyll Street area, showing the Argyll Rooms. Based on Horwood's map of 1792, with Nash’s revised line for Regent Street superimposed. From *Survey of London* (1963), vol. xxxi. With permission.
Fig. 4b. Plan, presented to the House of Commons, of a Street proposed from Charing Cross to Portland Place, leading to the Crown Estate in Mary-le-Bone Park, published 10 May 1813. Crown property is highlighted in blue and that to be compulsorily purchased, in red. British Library Maps (Crace Port. 12.16).
frontage (echoing that of the Quadrant), and, in the new domed assembly rooms of 1819-20, a quasi-public exterior (fig. 5). As completed, this attractive set of new Argyll Rooms indeed emerged as one of the few buildings in Regent Street fashioned in its entirety by the chief architect; its design was given outright to the musicians by Nash, at no cost to them.24

Preserving the Rooms in 1813 as a performance venue (soon to be refurbished) accords with common understanding of how the Society used the building. Curiously, the inaugural Philharmonic concert, ‘Under the immediate patronage of His Royal Highness the Prince Regent’, took place on 8 March 1813, the exact day Nash’s updated plans were forwarded by the Commissioners to the Treasury.25 By the same token, eight concerts a year in a hall seating 450 seems hardly likely to have satisfied Crown authorities as a source of significant revenue justifying an annual tenancy. Some kind of additional, year-round activity would have been sought by Nash (for the Crown), even designed into the renovated accommodation, to produce the ongoing cash expected from such a high-end property. In this regard, it makes sense to consider the full period of time during which Nash may have met and encouraged a small group of interested musicians, fleshing out any initial music-occupancy idea possibly from as early as October 1811 (first Treasury approval of Nash’s plans) to the Society’s founding in February 1813. Given that the architect originally expected a new building on the site, probably with


25 The first concert’s programme, with music by Cherubini, Mozart, Sacchini, Beethoven, Haydn and Boccherini, is reproduced in Elkin, *Royal Philharmonic* (facing p. 14), and discussed by Ehrlich, op. cit. (pp 4, 6), with reference to the Society’s developing repertory. Prince Adolphus, Duke of Cambridge (1774-1850), attended the concert on 8 March; the Prince Regent did not.
a commercial function, he might well have consulted a retailer early on. Certainly he knew that in 1811-12 H. F. Greville, the old Rooms’ owner, was in deep financial trouble through speculation in music entertainment beyond the Rooms and might be glad to sell,26 and equally, that the London piano and music publishing trade was flourishing. A preliminary approach by Nash to one or more music firms in New Bond Street, Haymarket, Soho, Cheapside or Tottenham Court Road, if it took place, could easily have planted the idea of expansion or upgrade to the New Street as desirable. Moreover, such an approach might explain the special prominence of music retailers among the first dozen names on the Philharmonic Society’s founding document. J. B. Cramer, the celebrated pianist who with Francis Latour had joined Samuel Chappell in early 1811 to form Chappell & Co., was first on the list; P. Antony Corri, a son of the composer, teacher and publisher Domenico Corri once using the Prince of Wales’s imprimatur, was second;27 Muzio Clementi, the widely respected composer and pianist, a shrewd publisher and piano dealer in his own right, was fourth to sign; and R. H. Potter, of Goulding, D’Almaine, Potter & Co., came in at number 12. In the event, much of the Society’s early business was transacted not at the Argyll Rooms but at Chappell & Co., no. 124 New Bond Street, with Cramer reportedly playing for Directors’ meetings there.28

Clearly both commerce and performance shaped the nascent Philharmonic identity, whether in successive or parallel stages. But there were other factors, too, contributing fresh ideas in the months before February 1813. By offering a glimpse into personal alliances, the names and addresses on the founders’ list hint at these wider purposes (fig. 6). Geographical proximity to the West End is an obvious means by which individual musicians could have learned of Nash’s urban plans. All but five of the thirty on this list lived within walking distance of the Argyll Rooms, four of them directly in the development area: R. H. Potter, Sir George Smart, Franz Cramer, brother of J. B. and himself a leading violinist, and William Sherrington, a violist and later a chief rescuer of the valuable Philharmonic Library from the 1830 fire. The presence of three pairs of related family members on the list or in its immediate background – families of the first three signers only, that is – raises the additional probability of private confidence in any mooted investment scheme: J. B. and Franz Cramer were brothers; P. A. Corri and John

26 Lt.-Col. Henry Francis Greville (1760-1816) was the wayward second son of Fulke Greville, M.P. (1717-1806). He became lesseholder of the Little Argyll Street house in 1802, then full owner in 1806, borrowing money to convert the property for public entertainments. In 1807-8 the Rooms hosted minor theatrical performances, in 1810 masked balls; by early 1811 Greville was known to be deep in debt though also interested in the Pantheon theatre conversion. He tried to sell the Argyll Rooms in February 1811 (The Times, 7 Feb. 1811), purchased the Pantheon lease with supporters in July, then brought in, with their cash, the architect Nicholas Candy and the Lisbon opera administrator J. P. de Souza Caldas to renovate that building on a grand scale. Nash’s repair work on the Pantheon roof in spring 1812 probably gave him close knowledge of Greville’s weak financial position. See ‘The Argyll Rooms, Little Argyll Street’, Survey of London, vol. xxxi, pp. 301-6, and ‘N.W. Candy’s theatre at the Pantheon’, vol. xxxi, pp. 279-81.

27 The rather lower musical profile of Philip Antony Corri (1784?-1832) compared with that of his father Domenico (1746-1825) begs the question why the son took such a high place at the Society’s founding. A guess might be that in power negotiations beforehand, Antony Corri was seen by Clementi, Viotti and their friends as a suitable proxy for his aging father (once imprisoned for debt), in a directorate needing some balance to the Cramer and Dance families as well as an instrumental (not operatic) focus. In fact Antony would try to undermine Philharmonic unity in 1815, with Viotti, setting up a rival concert series; but by early 1817, largely for personal reasons, he had emigrated to the USA, remarried and changed his name to Arthur Clifton.

28 William Chappell, ‘Chappell & Co.’, A Dictionary of Music and Musicians, op. cit., vol. i, pp. 339-40. See also Stanley Lucas, ‘Philharmonic Society’, ibid., vol. iii, p. 698, who gives J. B. Cramer, P. A. Corri and William Dance, the first three names on the list, a leading role through inviting ‘various professional friends’ to join them at the meeting of 24 January 1813. Stress on those first three names not only shadows information in an early press report by R. M. Bacon (probably advised by Smart or Horsley), ‘The Philharmonic Society’, Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review, i (1818), pp. 340-50; it may also reflect a constructed symbolism for the new society, namely, a joining of three national backgrounds (German, Franco-Italian, English) and three business or compositional areas (piano/keyboard, vocal/stage, violin/instrumental).
Fig. 6. Philharmonic Society foundation book, with signatures and addresses of the original thirty members, 6 February 1813 (BL, RPS MS. 272, f.1).
A. Moralt were brothers-in-law; William Dance, the third person to sign, was father of Henry Dance, a young solicitor who, though not a signing member, acted as original secretary for the group. Still more suggestive, William Dance’s uncle, the architect George Dance the Younger (1741–1825), a distinguished musical amateur well known to J. P. Salomon, the Cramers, old Charles Burney and once even Haydn himself, was in 1812 still working as City of London Surveyor: he certainly knew of the Marylebone Park plans through early dealings with the Regent’s Canal Co. and was a close colleague of the architect S. P. Cockerell, soon to help Nash with property valuations on the Street. The Dance family connection, in fact, emerges as specially interesting, and probably influential, for two further reasons: George the Younger had also been a founding member of the Royal Academy of Arts more than forty years earlier (RA, 1768; he would soon be the last surviving founder), and in 1813 he was still assiduous in the RA’s work; while William, besides being a noted violinist and keyboard player once connected with the Professional Concert and Italian opera at the King’s Theatre, was a senior figure at the Royal Society of Musicians (RSM), chairing regular meetings and AGMs (June 1810 to December 1813) just when his son Henry acted as RSM solicitor and when the Prince Regent became Hon. President. In this way, clear and direct linkage to both the RSM and the RA, each holding a royal charter, was embedded at the Philharmonic Society’s foundation. Eighteen Philharmonic names, fully sixty per cent of those signing the founders’ list, were already members of the RSM and thus professionally ‘approved’ by February 1813. And within only months, once the New Street Act had become law on 10 July, a printed Philharmonic Society proposal clearly cited the ‘Royal Academy of Painters’ with its exhibition, trialling, teaching and scholarly functions as the explicit model for the new music society’s larger goal, to become the nation’s official Royal Academy of Music (not to be confused with the music school of that name founded in 1822) (fig. 7).

On balance, the notion that a chance for property ownership, professional definition and enhanced status combined to activate the Society is more credible than the alternative – that thirty musicians just sat down one day to give top-quality concerts at a faded venue for no pay. That bare narrative does need explaining by more than ‘harmonic love’ or a particular aesthetic preference. Still, there is no doubt that practical music-making and a jockeying for control of taste figured strongly: Nash could not have conjured an orchestral client group from nothing. And to be sure, key Philharmonic founders were performing regularly before

29 See Dorothy Stroud, George Dance, Architect: 1741–1825 (London, 1971), pp. 173–4, 190; and Summerson, op. cit., p. 81. Dance was also a portraitist. Among the celebrated figures who sat to him in the 1790s and early 1800s were the musicians Joah Bates, William Shield, Haydn, Salomon, Samuel Arnold, Charles Knivett (elder and younger) and Samuel Harrison.


31 In order of RSM election, 1774–1811: Blake, Dance, Shield, Salomon, Potter, Attwood, Webbe, Ashley, F. Cramer, Horsley, Knivett, J. B. Cramer, Sherrington, Neate, Griffin, Moralt, Bishop and Novello. Soon after 1813, the RSM apparently declined in member interest (Minute of meeting on 4 Sept. 1814: D/base Ref. MGV-1814-9). It is important to note a key distinction between the RSM and Philharmonic Society: the first was a mutual and benevolent society requiring proof of professional status to join; the second, joined by invitation only, was a cooperative intended eventually to be a training and validation body, actively exhibiting and maintaining professional standards.

32 ‘Abstract of a Plan for Establishing a Royal Academy of Music’, 19 July 1813 (BL, Add. MS. 41771, ff. 6v–7r). Parallels with the elder Academy in size and governance appear to have been deliberate. For the projected music Academicians, three-fourths were to have been born in Great Britain and one-fourth could be ‘foreigners’ – proportions reflecting the Philharmonic founders almost exactly.
**ABSTRACT OF A PLAN**

**FOR ESTABLISHING A ROYAL ACADEMY OF MUSIC.**

THE present state of the general cultivation of Music, in its prevalence in every age, and its adoption by all classes, has brought British Musicians to so great a degree of excellence in their art, that nothing seems wanting to complete their success, but that in some manner which will enable the Royal Academy of Painters to do, not only offer, but to reward, all commensurate productions; and propose honorably to admit the Royal Highness the Prince Regent to establish a Royal Academy of Music, to consist of forty Academicians, twenty Associates, and twenty Students. Of the Academicians, three-fourths to be born in Great Britain, and one-fourth to be elected to be Foreigners. From the Academicians one to be chosen as President, eight to form a Council, three as Lecturers, one as Superintendents, a Treasurer, and a Secretary. All the Academicians to receive their diploma from the Prince Regent.

The Associates to be elected by the Academicians, and form the body of all future Academicians to be chosen. The Associates not to have any share in the government of this Academy.

The Students to be instructed by Masters appointed for the purpose, and to attend upon certain days appointed for Musical Rehearsals or Exercises, under the direction of the Superintendents.

The Academy to meet once in every from the day of November to the day of June, in the evening, to hear papers on such subjects relative to Music, and to examine and try such compositions as may be recommended to its notice.

**LECTURES TO BE ANNUALLY DELIVERED UPON**

The History and Philosophical Theory of Music; The Theory and Practice of Composition; Poetry, in its application to Music.

*Fig. 7. Abstract of a Plan for Establishing a Royal Academy of Music, 19 July 1813. Preserved by Sir George Smart, with MS. annotations in his hand (BL, Add. MS. 41771, ff. 6v-7r).*
and during the early 1810s, at leading venues from the Hanover Square Rooms and King’s Theatre to churches and private mansions, not to mention the London Tavern, Bishopsgate, in the City of London.\textsuperscript{33} The period from March to June 1812 was no exception, with its charity events, subscription series and benefit concerts; this suggests the distinct possibility that ideas for a new music society circulated by these means. Three likely occasions with Philharmonic pre-echoes leap from contemporary records: a private concert on 15 March 1812 at the Marchioness of Hertford’s residence, at which Salomon led the band with the Regent and his brothers present;\textsuperscript{34} the pianist Charles Neate’s benefit concert on 2 June 1812 at the Hanover Square Rooms, with George Smart conducting a programme uncannily like those in the Society’s first season, including Beethoven’s Sixth Symphony, a Mozart duo from \textit{Le nozze di Figaro} and the (claimed) first English performance of Cherubini’s Overture to \textit{Anacréon};\textsuperscript{35} and Domenico Corri’s re-presentation of his successful theatrical entertainment \textit{The Travellers} at the Argyll Rooms in late June 1812.\textsuperscript{36}

Any, all or even none of those events, with or without a commercial interest in the background, might have tested the waters, furthered discussion or stimulated a Philharmonic steering group in concert with Nash: the exact circumstances, who said what to whom first, will probably never be known. What is clear is that once dialogue began, the conversation gradually widened to include more musicians: from a simple exchange in the months March-May 1812 perhaps, to small exploratory discussions across June-September, to a larger search for potential investors over the autumn and winter months, up to January 1813.\textsuperscript{37} At each stage, questions would have been asked about the site itself (given that the more attractive Hanover Square Rooms, already prestigious, were so close by), about legal and financial implications for buying and renovating the property (total cost, a time frame for payments, fair allocation of shares), and perhaps most enticing, about the Rooms’ potential. Indeed some of these concerns emerge in two of the earliest extant documents touching on the project, both of them letters containing

\textsuperscript{33} See Taylor, \textit{Music in London}, pp. 32-83, for details of activity c. 1795-1812. Performances took place chiefly at venues in Westminster. Lesser-known concerts in the City of London offered early Beethoven symphony and (unstaged) Mozart opera performances, 1806-9, which, for their collaborative efforts by Ayrton, Neate, Griffin, Smart and Dance, together with musicians and amateurs soon associated with the Society (e.g. Paolo Spagnoletti, John Brahm, John Sterland), may have been specially influential. See King, ‘The Quest for Sterland’, op. cit.; and Rachel Cowgill, ‘“Wise Men from the East”: Mozart’s Operas and their Advocates in Early Nineteenth-Century London’, in Christina Bashford and Leanne Langley (eds.), \textit{Music and British Culture, 1785-1914: Essays in Honour of Cyril Ehrlich} (Oxford, 2000), pp. 39-64.

\textsuperscript{34} As reported by the oboist W. T. Parke in his \textit{Musical Memoirs}, op. cit., vol. ii, p. 77. Nash was close to the Hertford set, including Hertford’s son Lord Yarmouth (later the 3rd Marquess), who advised the Regent on art collecting. Their residence, Hertford House in Manchester Square, now houses the Wallace Collection.

\textsuperscript{35} Advertisement, \textit{The Times} (1 June 1812). Paolo Spagnoletti was leader, the Duke of Cambridge patron. The \textit{Anacréon} overture would later be the opening work at the first Philharmonic concert and the second most frequently performed piece in the Society’s first fifty years (after Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony).

\textsuperscript{36} Advertisement, \textit{The Times} (23 June 1812): ‘To-morrow, the 24th inst. will be performed the MUSIC of the Opera of the TRAVELLERS, or Music’s fascination, composed by D. Corri, as performed at the late Theatre-Royal, Drury-lane, and which, on account of the fire of that theatre, has not since been performed in London. By the title of Music’s Fascination, the Author meant to shew the charms and powers that music can effect from a simple Chinese melody to the highest refinement of European harmony. After the above performance, other rooms will be appropriated for a BALL.’ Corri had also reportedly given Pergolesi’s Stabat mater in the Rooms with his students on 18 March 1812, repeated on 27 April (Elkin, \textit{Old Concert Rooms}, op. cit., p. 115). Such events could have constituted a test of the venue by the musicians taking part.

\textsuperscript{37} On the model of the Regent’s Canal Co., Nash would have preferred to work with a small inner directorate, allowing them to gather finance over several months (see n. 18 above). The Philharmonic timing proposed here allows for a similar approach, including courtier permissions, meetings of trusted music representatives and the soliciting of wider support. July 1812 is an educated guess of when all the parties might have first come together seriously, discussing share divisions and a gradual strategy for projecting themselves as a society of enlarged professional ambitions.
comment by Muzio Clementi. In the first, written on 20 January 1813 by G. B. Viotti to an unnamed correspondent – clearly someone of importance in the founders’ circle who was aware of competing player factions but still confident of the proposed scheme, possibly Salomon – Clementi adds a PS to Viotti’s text urging care over the impending decision set for Sunday 24 January:

Amico [Viotti] has said every thing I had intended saying in reply to your note of this morning, and I conclude there will yet be much time for our arrangements as you see no occasion for hurry. Our plans are fully known to you, and consequently there is nothing new to be said. I am curious to know how they mean to dispose of the difficulty of the annuity, and Mr Bird’s Rent; there is much scope for Mr Litchfield’s talents in clearing away the minor obstacles that yet seem to stand in his way. I have not heard whether my proportion is yet finally arranged – every point must be clearly settled before the sale, or it will be our business to oppose it. I consented to the sale only upon certain conditions stated to me. If you have the letters from the Treasury upon this subject, as I think you have the two, pray bring them with you on Sunday.38

Clearly both Clementi and Viotti were talked round somehow since they both joined. Viotti, a celebrated Italian violinist once resident in Paris and a former rival of the Cramers’ father, would sign in at position 15 on the founders’ list; among his personal allies in addition to Clementi was P. A. Corri. Annuity and rent difficulties probably refer here to ongoing sums received in H. F. Greville’s absence by his legal proxy (Greville had reportedly now left the country, bankrupt; his father had died in 1806) – a situation rightly seen by Clementi as potentially affecting the Rooms’ ownership and cost, thus requiring caution. In the second letter, written to Viotti almost two years later on 15 December 1814, Clementi corrects his friend’s understanding of a recent ‘announcement about the payments’, clarifying that ‘they are proposed for 1816’.39 This almost certainly refers to a first call on Philharmonic investors in preparation for the Rooms’ expected purchase.

Although a positive decision to take the building was apparently reached on 24 January 1813 – sources vary about who appeared at William Dance’s house that day – some other key points remained pending, notably an agreement with Greville’s representative to actually sell. But Nash’s persuasive skills, together with those of Henry Charles Litchfield, Treasurer of the Inner Temple, seem to have been reassuring. Founders then moved to clarify operational issues. Already by Tuesday 26 January Salomon was writing to William Ayrton of his recent positive interview with Lord Cholmondeley (Lord Steward of the Household), who was ‘much pleased’ with the whole Academy idea and suggested conferences with the Marquess of Hertford (Lord Chamberlain) and Lord Sidmouth (Home Secretary) to progress it. Presumably at the

38 Molden 1553, Box 13, Rosaleen Moldenhauer Collection, Library of Congress, Washington DC (emphasis original). Clementi’s English text is an addendum to a longer French one by Viotti, who in the same letter alludes to ‘the crisis approaching’ and the need for conspiratorial action: ‘You have doubtless not forgotten our conversations and the possibility that we might attempt to strike a good bargain with the help of some friends – those ready are friends, but we still need some time to meet, make a plan and arrange everything according to the turn of events.’ Cited in David Rowland, ‘Viotti and Clementi: Friendship, Publishing, the Philharmonic Society and the Royal Academy of Music’, in Massimiliano Sala (ed.), Giovanni Battista Viotti: A Composer between Two Revolutions (Bologna, 2006), pp. 377-94 (pp. 383-5 and 384, n. 22). Salomon was more closely allied with Viotti and Clementi than with Cramer or Dance, as well as a central mover in the earliest plan for an all-encompassing Royal Academy of Music.


40 J. P. Salomon to W. Ayrton, postmarked Tuesday, 26 Jan. [1813], BL, Add. MS. 52337A, f. 26. ‘This is the first of four brief Salomon letters preserved by Ayrton on the subject of their joint special interest, the original Academy plan; Salomon’s last letter is dated Tuesday, 10 Jan. 1814 [recte: 1815], f. 31. See also [W. Ayrton], ‘Memoir of Johann Peter Salomon’, Harmonicon, viii (1830), pp. 45-7, in which Ayrton credits Salomon as his chief colleague in trying to prosecute the Society’s enlarged idea of an Academy of Music on the RA model.  

19 eBLJ 2013, Article 12
foundational meeting, 6 February, the first Philharmonic directors and treasurer were elected, subscriptions were collected and plans for the imminent concert season discussed. As the months and years rolled on, such matters increasingly occupied the meetings – selection of directors, rule changes, member and associate-member elections, cash flow and, in the directors’ meetings, artist engagements – rather than the building project or the incipient Academy. But whereas long-range institutional plans receded from the written record, the concerts’ success justified every hope: by summer 1819, demand for access, more space and improved facilities indeed showed that the old Argyll Rooms, previously on seasonal hire to the Society but now finally in possession, were inadequate to their purposes.  

From Renovate to Rebuild

Exactly how Nash’s design for the Rooms evolved is hard to pin down. What began or was proposed as a fairly modest renovation on behalf of thirty people turned into a major rebuild for a smaller group, transforming a 75-year-old house with small theatre, refectory and game rooms into a modern performance complex. By triangulating evidence from Crown Estate papers in the National Archives with that in letters and press material in the British Library and illustrative material from further afield, we can make some educated guesses about what happened. Though complicated by delays and financial reverses, weak management and plain bad luck, the project still produced an extraordinary building for Regent Street, in effect the first purpose-built orchestral concert hall in Britain.

One of the most important missing elements in this story has long been any exterior view of the original Rooms in situ. Now a watercolour in the Paul Mellon Collection at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, supplies that element (fig. 8). This drawing, attributed to G. S. Repton by the architectural historian Howard Colvin, represents a stage preparatory to Nash’s new floor plans of May to July 1819. Looking northeast, it may have been created in late 1818 or early 1819 (or even earlier, given the King Street sign) as a means of visualizing and solving the ‘corner problem’ from a New Street perspective. Together with basic sketches and written descriptions, the image helps to illuminate Philharmonic Society accommodation in its first seven seasons and reveal more exactly what Nash was dealing with. The main assembly room, measuring c. 53’ x 26’, was situated on the ground floor, with its orchestra at the King Street end and the public entrance in Little Argyll Street at the door just to the right and below.

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41 ‘Our possession of [these rooms] during the late season has shewn us that the public will no longer frequent them unless they are enlarged and improved’ (J. B. Cramer, Thomas Welsh, William Hawes, William Ayrton, E. C. Meyer, Ferdinand Ries and Henry Mullinex [RHI Directorate] to Alexander Milne, 22 July 1819, TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Before 1819 the Rooms had been let to the Society for individual concerts by their freeholder; by February 1819 the RHI, a subset of the Society, had become freeholder. See below, pp. 26-31.

42 Besides the letters in TNA: PRO CRES 26/108, the National Archives holds Land Revenue Enrolment Books giving details of successive deeds for the property (some with a ground plan), namely TNA: PRO LR 1/259, 263, 272-274; and also individual legal documents relating to it, namely TNA: PRO CRES 38/1320 and 38/1375.

43 The only known interior image is Robert Cruikshank’s humorous ‘A Celebrated Performer in the Philharmonic Society’ (London, 1818), depicting the violinist Paolo Spagnoletti looking through the F-holes of his upturned instrument (used for the front cover of Ehrlich, First Philharmonic, op. cit.).

44 Howard Colvin, A Biographical Dictionary of British Architects, 1600-1840, 4th edn (New Haven, 2008), p. 732. The Yale catalogue attributes the picture jointly to Repton and Nash (original call number B1975.2.368). Repton was admitted as a subscriber to Philharmonic Society concerts in 1817, 1818 and 1819.

45 For a vivid description of the old Rooms’ interior, see the pocket Leigh’s New Picture of London (London, 1818), pp. 370-2, quoted in the ‘The Argyll Rooms, Little Argyll Street’ section of the Survey of London, op. cit., vol. xxxi, p. 304. A basic ground plan of the site is recorded in TNA: PRO LR 1/259, between ff. 206v and 207r. A better idea of the size and shape of the room can be seen in Nash’s ‘Plan for Altering Mr Slade’s Premises’, 14 May 1818 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108), fig. 11 below.
A Place for Music: John Nash, Regent Street and the Philharmonic Society of London

Fig. 8. [Old] Argyll Rooms, Little Argyll Street at King Street. Watercolour over graphite, attributed to George Stanley Repton and John Nash, c. 1818–19. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, Paul Mellon Collection.
the bay window. This was the room in which Luigi Cherubini appeared on four occasions for the Society in 1815, bringing three new works, and where in 1816 Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony was first given in England. The original Argyll House (later the site of the London Palladium) was just around the corner to the right where Little Argyll Street turns into Argyll Street.

At the start of the project, a key obstacle unknown to Nash (a ‘storm’, he later said) lay in wait for the musicians – a shrewd third party, Mr Stephen Slade, Greville’s manager at the old Rooms. Himself a well-heeled businessman, a glass and china dealer, Slade had detected future value in the property and managed to purchase its freehold by May 1813. It was therefore Slade to whom, on 30 December 1814, the New Street Commissioners sent their requisite notice of compulsory property purchase (fig. 9). On further application and repeated interviews

![Fig. 9. Commissioners’ notice of intention to purchase the Argyll Assembly Rooms, 30 December 1814. The National Archives: Public Record Office CRES 26/108. With permission.](image)

46 The *Times* advertisement for sale of the Rooms in 1811 (7 Feb.) named Slade as first point of contact. From 1809 he had lived at no. 24 Argyll Street (west side), and by 1810 held a licence for masked balls at the Rooms and was known as ‘conductor of the household’ (*Argyll Street Area*, *Survey of London*, op. cit., vol. xxxi, p. 303). Already part-owner, having helped Greville pay for major renovations, he seems to have invested further in 1811–12, knowing that the assemblies and play bookings were profitable. For Slade’s ownership, see TNA: PRO LR 1/259 and CRES 38/1320. While there is no proof of whether or when Slade might have guessed the Philharmonic Society were Nash’s real clients, he obviously believed the Commissioners could be pressed to pay more.
by Nash in mid-1815, in which the architect explained his basic intentions, Slade refused to cooperate, pretending to negotiate but really only suggesting various ways he could ‘make still better terms’ with the Commissioners. Nash responded by ignoring him, playing for time and maintaining an appearance of not really needing the property. 

Concerned at the silence nearly a year later, Slade came forward in April 1816 through his solicitors, Messrs B. & P. Goode, with his own proposal, illustrated by an attached drawing (fig. 10). The offer indicated that Slade would sell a small part of his site outright to the Commissioners (coach houses and stables, coloured yellow); sell the main part for £8000 in return for a 99-year lease (front of site including the main assembly room, coloured blue); and keep a third part for himself (back of site, coloured red). Nash refused, knowing the asking price was exorbitant. Though naive in style, Slade’s drawing remains important for capturing his understanding of the Crown’s earliest requirements, above all an extended ‘orchestra’, as Nash called it, giving a prominent rounded corner to the site, shown by Slade’s semicircle of black dots. Clearly the architect knew what he wanted to do with that front corner.

Fig. 10. Slade’s watercolour drawing of his premises’ ground plan, enclosed with Messrs Goode’s letter to the Commissioners, 15 April 1816. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.

Throughout most of 1817 Nash focused on bigger problems. For one thing, he was also remodelling the King’s Theatre, Haymarket, inside and out, building a continuous colonnade on the theatre’s north, east and south sides and an enclosed shopping arcade on its west side (Royal Opera Arcade, still extant). So he left Slade to stew, surrounded by builders’ waste

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47 Nash to Alexander Milne, 3 July 1815 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).
48 Messrs Goode to the Commissioners, 15 April 1816 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).
from work on adjacent New Street sites and seeing cracks in his walls as a result. Finally in December 1817 the architect re-opened negotiations, explaining again his particular needs for the street line and stressing the great benefit Slade would gain from having both a new curved corner and a New Street frontage. When this approach received little positive response, Nash grew impatient, foreseeing harder bargaining or a jury decision as the only way forward. By 6 April 1818 he had completed a formal valuation of the whole of Slade’s property, including compensation for ground and materials, the coach houses and stables, rent and a 40-year lease on the Rooms, also quoting the cost of building the recommended new ‘orchestra’. Although Slade did not accept these terms, he appears to have been attracted by Nash’s next, more appealing idea, a land trade giving him a small piece of ground to the north of his property in exchange for a similarly sized piece of ground at the front of his site, needed for the street itself. These two marked areas are shown on the following drawing, respectively as A (coloured red) and B (yellow), with an explanation in Nash’s hand (fig. 11). Again, however, an imaginative tack came to nothing and Slade refused to be placated. It must have been a wearying process for everyone. To his credit, Nash dealt carefully with each objection raised by the freeholder, consistent with clarifying Crown requirements and maintaining his own prior if unstated arrangements with the Philharmonic Society. The difficulty was two-edged. He knew that whatever price was settled on Slade would be the price Philharmonic Society members would have to pay; at the same time, anything less than full ownership of the site might compromise their aims. In the end he had to be guided by his own first object, to complete the street as efficiently and attractively as possible.

Fig. 11. Plan for Altering Mr Slade’s Premises. Watercolour over ink drawing, with annotation in Nash’s hand, 14 May 1818. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.

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50 Slade complained at least three times to Milne, on 15 Jan., 28 April and 11 Dec. 1817 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Nash eventually instructed the adjacent builder, Samuel Baxter, to remove the rubbish and repair Slade’s north wall.

51 Nash to Milne, 19 Dec. 1817, reporting the results of his previous day’s encounter with Slade and Messrs Goode (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Slade had now set an even higher price, but Nash was firm in return, offering to go to arbitration (declined), then offering to build Slade’s orchestra besides potentially giving him a piece of land.

52 Nash’s formal valuation, dated 6 April 1818 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). The calculation amounted to £1037 for the ground and coach houses needed by the Crown for the Street, and £5900 for the Rooms, or £6937 all together. Nash did not reckon any figure for loss of goodwill. The projected cost of building a new rounded orchestra, replacing Slade’s, was put at £900. See also n. 55 below.

53 ‘Plan for Altering Mr Slade’s Premises’, 14 May 1818 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). See fig. 11.
With his patience at a low ebb, the rest of the street nearly finished, and a limited window of time for Argyll Rooms construction (avoiding the concert season), Nash determined to press ahead. On 22 July 1818 he issued an ultimatum to Slade, offering three clear choices or else arbitration to determine any greater compensation. Enclosing separate plans labelled A, B and C, he explained the differences among them and declared starkly that none of the plans involved taking over or interfering with Slade’s Assembly Room business.\footnote{‘My inducement in making you these several proposals, is to endeavour to meet your interests & wishes, [...] or, if you will make out a plan of what you yourself propose building on the vacant ground, I will endeavour to frame a proposition grounded on that plan, or the Crown will submit the value of the ground required to arbitration: but I beg it may be distinctly understood, that they do not require your Assembly rooms, nor to interfere with them in any way, nor in any way affect your profits arising from that undertaking; on the contrary they are ready to provide you with as much ground north of your stables, as they may require ground of you to lay into the Street, and leave to arbitration whether over and above these propositions, any other, & what compensation, should be paid you under the New Street Act’ (Nash to Slade [copy], 22 July 1818, TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Nash was both calling Slade’s bluff and conveying a certain bluff himself, taking the Rooms physically out of discussion to move the larger project on.} In ‘A’ the Crown would pay Slade £500 for the ground required for the street line and he could do what he liked with the yard; in ‘B’ the Crown would pay £1500 for the whole of the ground on which Slade’s yard and stables stood, to erect their own shops; in ‘C’ no cash would be paid but, in exchange for the ground needed for the street, the Crown would build for Slade a line of basement cellars along the street line and a New Street entrance to his Assembly Rooms, in addition to full dining or game rooms over a set of new Crown-owned shops and a storage loft over the new dining rooms. Common to all three plans were two non-negotiable points – the exact line of the New Street and an extended ‘New Orchestra’ on the corner (fig. 12). In effect Nash was

\begin{figure}
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Plan_C}
\caption{Copy of Plan C of Nash’s final offer to Slade, sent with letter dated 22 July 1818. Watercolour over ink drawing. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.}
\end{figure}
forcing Slade to accept what the Crown intended for the site, leaving him to choose whether he
wanted to benefit from it; meanwhile the architect remained confident in his own calculations
should a jury be necessary. Having asked for an ‘immediate and direct answer’, he got one:
nine days later Slade’s lawyer confirmed that his client accepted none of the proposals. A jury
date was set for early November and the two parties prepared their cases. The outcome was
a stunning blow for Nash and the Philharmonic Society – an award of £22,750 to Mr Slade.
This unexpectedly large sum was due not only to a difference of opinion on the value of the
entire (freehold) property – at £19,500, nearly three times what Nash had calculated55 – but
also to Slade’s hefty claim for loss of goodwill, i.e. the trade he would lose by being put out of
a profitable business for what he asserted would be three years, besides losses from the sale of
his wardrobes, i.e. fancy-dress costumes used for the assemblies. 56 It was a result very far from
what Nash had envisaged.

Though posing a major challenge to the Society, the Rooms’ price tag was at least now clear,
ending a near six-year wait and propelling Philharmonic members to their next step. After they
raised their terms of public subscription and secured a bank loan, fresh ideas came thick and
fast.57 Their key move was to set up a separate joint-stock company of active investors who could
put cash on the table, deal directly with the Crown and take over the site for the Society. Within
weeks, by 7 December 1818, a subcommittee of seven people had been selected. They applied
to the Commissioners to take the Rooms for six months, January to July 1819, on condition they
be granted a subsequent lease for new buildings they wished to erect according to a design to be
settled with ‘the Architect of the Crown’.58 As can be seen in fig. 13, the signers were Thomas
Attwood, William Ayrton, J. B. Cramer, William Hawes, Charles Knyvett, George T. Smart
and Thomas Welsh – all ‘deputed by the united body of 21 musical professors’ who planned
to manage the project on behalf of the Philharmonic Society but as yet had no independent
 corporate identity. Their request was granted, but only after a nerve-wracking delay in Nash’s
own communications. On 25 December 1818 he had written to James Pillar, of the Board:

55 Nash’s valuation of 6 April 1818 had come to £6937 all together (see n. 52 above). On this basis, it seems reasonable
to infer that Nash might originally have suggested to potential Philharmonic founders in 1812 or early 1813 that they
could secure the Rooms for, say, thirty equal shares of £200-230 each (or, if desired at two contributory levels, say,
fifteen shares of £250 and fifteen of £150).
56 ‘New Street Act: Argyle-Rooms’, The Times (3 Nov. 1818). Slade’s annual profits were claimed to be a healthy £2400.
For the Crown, the Attorney General explained among other things how any Slade removal could be completed
in nine months rather than three years. Ayrton appeared as a witness to verify that the New Street would be an
advantage to Slade’s assemblies. In the context of other compensation claims on the Street, however, Slade’s large
award followed a pattern: see Summerson, op. cit., pp. 82, 84 (‘Juries, it seemed, were always on the side of the
dispossessed’), and 88.
57 In late 1818 the terms for Honorary Subscribers (i.e. not Philharmonic members) went up from three to four guineas
a season (equivalent to 10s. 6d. a concert). That some members saw a sign of future difficulty in these events is
suggested by Clementi’s letter declining his recent appointment as a director, written on 17 Nov. 1818: ‘My various
occupations, together with the anxiety I feel for the welfare of that Society, do not permit me to accept a director’s
place, which ought to be filled by a man of leisure and activity, as well as ability’ (RPS MS. 338, f. 195); quoted
in Simon McVey, ‘Clementi, Viotti and the London Philharmonic Society’, in Roberto Illiano, Luca Sala and
58 Letter to New Street Commissioners, 7 Dec. 1818 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). The text shows every sign of having
been coached by Nash and written by Ayrton, whose home address appears as an annotation at the bottom (see
fig. 13). Entries in Smart’s memo book (BL, Add. MS. 42225, ff. 17v, 20r) suggest that he and each of the other
members began advancing cash to the ‘Argyle Institution’ in late December 1818 – in Smart’s case perhaps £300 as
a first payment, then definitely £250 on 29 July 1819 and another £150 on 14 December 1819 (by 22 April 1820, he
reckoned he had advanced a total of £700: see n. 87 below).
Fig. 13. Application letter of original Regent's Harmonic Institution subcommittee to the New Street Commissioners for a lease on the Argyll Rooms, 7 December 1818. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.
Sir,

By some accident your letter of the 10th inst. enclosing the proposals of Messrs. Ayrton and others for the Argyle Rooms has been mislaid, which I regret. Mr Ayrton has several times applied to me to know if the Commissioners accepted those proposals. In answer to your letter I beg to state that the proposals of Mr Ayrton and the other gentlemen who have signed those proposals were the result of a previous negotiation between me and them – and I beg to recommend the Board to acquiesce in them – and also that no time may be lost in signifying to Mr Ayrton the Board’s pleasure on the subject (Mr Ayrton resides at No. 4 in James St, Westminster, near Buckingham Gate) – as I have reason to think they will take immediate steps for building on the vacant ground and completing that part of the New Street. Their intention is to alter & improve the present theatre as a music room & theatre for the French plays, to build a museum for selling music along the front of the street & a small room over it.

I have the honour to be, Sir,

Your obedient servant,

John Nash

This letter not only links Nash unequivocally with the musicians, projecting some of their ideas for the site (‘French plays’ refers to a regular letting the Philharmonic Society wanted to keep, ‘museum’ to their new shop and library plan); it also confirms William Ayrton as prominent leader and communicator for the group. Having staged the first complete London production of Mozart’s Don Giovanni at the King’s Theatre in spring 1817 – to huge acclaim – Ayrton was at the peak of his administrative powers. As writer and editor, too, he came into his own during the Argyll Rooms development, and remains its most articulate voice through his reports of early Philharmonic concerts in the Morning Chronicle and Harmonicon and his retrospective remarks on the Regent’s Harmonic Institution. That name for the ‘united body of 21 musical professors’ was a little slow to appear in print, and would soon be altered to Royal Harmonic Institution after George IV’s accession in 1820; it was sometimes shortened to just Harmonic Institution. Inventive as the formulation was, though – invoking patron, profession and hoped-for status at once – it was slippery in concept. It was used alike for the Philharmonic subgroup who with their private cash refurbished the Regent Street building, and for the group’s activities in the Rooms including a commercial publishing venture, all the while intended as distinct from the (non-profit) Philharmonic Society proper: that group were still aspiring to a royal charter, of course, not wishing to be seen as property developers. Later the name’s various incarnations (Regent’s, Royal, Harmonic), together with its mixed application (for building, music shop, imprint) and the group’s loose formation (the RHI was never legally constituted or governed by rules), added to confusion over relations between Society and Institution – and latterly, over who was responsible when the financial burden grew intolerable. But at the start, forming a dedicated company to channel funds quickly, work with the architect, and generate ‘product’ for the shop made perfect sense.

There is no known separate cache of primary documents for the RHI. The fullest account of its membership and early activity is contained instead in a new London periodical of 1819, the English Musical Gazette; or, Monthly Intelligencer (printed by Arding & Merrett of Old Boswell Court, Carey Street). Without giving a name to the group, its February number lists 59

Nash to James Pillar, 25 Dec. 1818 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). A month later, Nash and his wife were admitted as ‘extra subscribers’ to the concerts (Directors’ Minutes, meeting of 24 Jan. 1819, RPS MS. 279, f. 64).

the following twenty-three music professionals as ‘actively engaged in preparing’ both fresh compositions and editions of ‘classical works, vocal and instrumental’, soon to be available for sale in a new musical establishment ‘at the west end of the town’: ‘Messrs. Attwood, Ayton; J. Beale, Braham, J. B. Cramer, Crotch, M.D.[,]J. Elliott, Greatorex, Griffin [Griffin], Hawes, Horsley, C. Knyvett, W. Knyvett, C. Meyer, Neate, Nield, Ries, J. Sale, Saust, Sir G. Smart, Welsh, and S. Wesley’. Clearly two more people had joined since early December 1818. And from the description here, the group’s aims were to print, publish and sell music; to sell instruments, especially pianos and harps ‘of all the esteemed makers’; and to set up a comprehensive library of music and historical music-reference materials, to be ‘constantly open to the Public at a moderate subscription’ (fig. 14).

Fig. 14. Earliest published description of the Regent’s Harmonic Institution, ‘English Literary Intelligence’, English Musical Gazette, February 1819 (BL, R.M.8.b.2).

61 ‘English Literary Intelligence’, English Musical Gazette, i (Feb. 1819), pp. 34-5 (p. 35) (BL., P.P.1947.aa). Membership seems to have hovered between twenty and twenty-three at the group’s height (1819). An additional, incomplete copy of this journal exists as BL., R.M.8.b.2 (lacking the number for July), with further original copies at Cambridge University Library, the Barber Music Library, Birmingham, Glasgow University Library, and the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
All along a key rationale for the ‘musical establishment’ had come from Crown pressure to produce revenue year round, ideally gained from the many consumers, musical and otherwise, who would be attracted to Regent Street: this was the expected trade-off for a lease to the full Argyll Rooms premises in the first place. But behind specific RHI publishing plans also lay motives aligning with the Philharmonic’s ‘Royal Academy of Music’ ethos: to ensure that printed music editions met the highest possible production standards (error free, author approved, printed on superior paper) and that talented new or lesser-known composers were encouraged in their creative efforts through access to better, fairer publication opportunities. Indeed in another column, the (anonymous) Gazette editor describes how a new ‘Little Society’ of some twenty people are meeting once a fortnight, ‘somewhere in the neighbourhood of Cavendish Square, at one of the members’ houses’, offering their work for critique and discussing each others’ new compositions – probably an oblique reference to RHI editorial gatherings.\footnote{‘Answers to Correspondents’, English Musical Gazette, i (Mar. 1819), p. 56. Since Ries lived at Cavendish Square, the idea may have been partly his, or the editorial and proofreading team led by him; other RHI members living in that immediate area were Neate, R. H. Potter, Smart and F. Cramer. Studying music in an atmosphere of mutual support seems to have been the aim: ‘Each member is obliged to produce a composition of his own (short or long) in rotation. What is wrong, is pointed out by the Umpire, and decided by the rest of the members. By this means, the young are informed.’}

63 Of course all three activities – publishing, instrument-selling and a music library – would be of great value to music students once the conservatory element of the grand plan was realized. In fact the identification of the short-lived English Musical Gazette as in all probability the RHI’s own publicity organ – spreading the word, testing the market, functioning as ‘social media’ with Ayrton as editorial mouthpiece – is now hard to resist, given the magazine’s full content, tone, timing, internal references, bibliographic traits, surviving copies and historical context beyond 1819.\footnote{Ayrton’s distinguished private collection of old music and music literature is described in A. Hyatt King, Some British Collectors of Music, c. 1600-1960 (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 52-3; the sale catalogue of his music library, sold in 1858 by Puttick & Simpson, is at BL, S.C.Puttick & Simpson 55(2).}

64 More research is needed on that probability as well as on the RHI’s published output over its fourteen years of printing activity, from April 1819 to May 1833. The firm would eventually issue perhaps up to 500 engraved editions, mostly arrangements of pre-existing pieces but also a few original works. At the head of them all was Beethoven’s gigantic ‘Hammerklavier’ Sonata, op. 106, in a two-part form authorized by the composer, who in 1819 was already in direct communication with Ferdinand Ries over its production (fig. 15).\footnote{If true, this might help explain Ayrton’s extreme anxiety over having a definite answer from the Commissioners in late December 1818: the Gazette announcement listing all twenty-three members appeared only in February and still without a clear name for the ‘establishment’.}

65 Regardless of any wider Gazette ambitions, though, its editor clearly valued his inside line to the Harmonic Institution just as that body’s new home was being shaped on the Nash–Repton drawing board.

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\footnote{There are two closely related RHI editions of the Beethoven sonata in the BL: h.376.(10) and (13), probably published c. 24 December 1819; and h.400.w (5) and (6), published in the first half of 1820. For their importance see Alan Tyson, ‘The Hammerklavier Sonata and its English Editions’, Musical Times, ciii (1962), pp. 235-7. Thanks to Ries’s work, these editions contain corrections from Beethoven that did not appear in Viennese editions of the same work.}
Fig. 15. Title-page of Beethoven, Grand Sonata for the Piano Forte (op. 106, called ‘The Hammerklavier’), published by the Regent’s Harmonic Institution, c. 24 December 1819 (BL, h.376.(10)).
Nash’s Argyll Rooms

Slade finally relinquished the old Rooms on 1 February 1819. The RHI had to stop him from stripping out all removable fixtures as he went – boxes, floors, doors, water closets, cisterns, partitions. And only belatedly did Commissioners give the old lessee of the yard and vaults, one Reilly, his official notice to vacate. All the while the Philharmonic Society ran their concerts as before, paying rent to the RHI now rather than to Slade, yet with two important additional differences signifying the new era. Starting in March 1819 the entire Philharmonic orchestra was paid; and concertos, large orchestral works featuring a single instrumental soloist, were finally allowed on the programmes. At the same time, the RHI eagerly began new lease negotiations. By May they had begun consulting with Nash on designs. Genuine optimism filled the air. On 22 July 1819 ‘Messrs. Ayrton’ wrote an advisory letter to the Commissioners, saying that their architectural plans were nearly finished, describing these as substantial, the concert room ‘new, grand, [...] larger than that at present erected’. Stressing their expenditure and the degree to which the Rooms’ future success would depend on ‘contingencies, [...] and events which can neither be foreseen nor controled’, the RHI now ventured to make a strong case for rent reduction. They addressed the Commissioners as ‘Patrons & promoters of public works’, and predicted a vast general improvement on the site: ‘nearly the whole of the premises [will] be covered with new and valuable buildings.’ Further, Ayrton and his colleagues justified the ‘enormous sum’ required for such improvements as essential to attracting the public, in turn suggesting that a twenty-five per cent reduction in ground rent might therefore be deemed appropriate by the Crown. In what was more or less a direct plea for government arts subsidy – possibly the earliest in British musical culture – the group offered to pay £600 a year rather than the previously agreed £800, emphasizing the ‘national nature’ of ‘this Institution’ (fig. 16).

Just over a week later, on 31 July 1819, Nash seconded the group’s application, recommending that the Commissioners grant the ‘Committee of the Philharmonic Society’ a 99-year lease for the whole premises at (a moderated) £700 a year; he also confirmed that unless the Rooms were indeed enlarged and improved, and quickly, the various societies using them would go elsewhere, rendering the old building of little or no value. His conclusion hit the nail on the head: ‘The plans which they now propose to adopt will contain Rooms so large and magnificent that they cannot fail taking the lead of all other buildings of that nature and will perfectly secure the rent reserved by the Crown.’ As promised, on 4 August 1819 ‘Messrs. Ayrton’ forwarded Nash’s plans with the hope that building work could begin that autumn. Two of these are reproduced below.

In the first drawing, showing the ground floor (see fig. 17), it is clear that Nash intended to retain as much of the old structure as possible, especially at the back of the site and including the old concert room walls running east-west at the site’s front, while the kitchen, scullery,

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66 Nash to Milne, 1 Feb. 1819 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108), reporting what Ayrton had observed of Slade’s actions and warning that the new tenants might require the Crown to refit the property if action were not taken. The notice to Reilly was sent on 23 March 1819.
65 The original rule prohibiting big solos had served as a check on individual egos as well as on any attempt to dominate share ownership through musical prowess. Once the lead-up to the capital building campaign was over and the site secured, concertos could take their place. Occasional ‘concertante’ works by foreign visiting players were programmed from 1816, but only in 1819 did the first real concertos appear, John Beale performing an unnamed Mozart piano concerto on 26 April and J. B. Cramer a new piano concerto of his own composing on 10 May.
69 Nash to Milne, 31 July 1819 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).
Fig. 16. Excerpt from the RHI subcommittee’s letter to Alexander Milne, requesting favourable terms for ground rent in return for their large outlay on a national institution, 22 July 1819, ff.1v–2r. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.
Fig. 17. Nash’s Plan of the Ground Floor, showing room usage and specifications, enclosed with the RHI’s covering letter to A. Milne, 4 August 1819. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.
larder, cellars and passages were to be regularized and newly fitted. Two toilets were to be situated on this floor, one under the stairs in the vestibule area, another at the back of the shop. The most arresting new features were, as expected along the front, a large rectangular ‘Music Shop or Warehouse’ (c. 47’ x 26’) with four big windows to New (Regent) Street and a covered walkway outside, enclosed by an iron railing and surmounted by a decorative balcony resting on stone columns with heads, or ‘terms’ (the balcony itself also to be enclosed with a railing); the much-discussed extended and rounded end, or apse, added to the old concert room on the southwest corner of the site; and, perhaps more surprising, two internal curved staircases, the larger one in the middle of the building being D-shaped (of Portland stone with a wrought-iron balustrade and mahogany handrail) and leading up to the lower end of the new main concert hall, with the smaller staircase at the northern end of the building leading up to a pair of seven-foot-high mezzanine rooms and thence to the orchestra itself at the top end of the new hall (those mezzanine rooms possibly being reserved for the Philharmonic Society’s own music and/or the intended subscription Music Library). Nash placed the orchestra entrance on Regent Street at the northwest corner of the site, the public entrance via a Regent Street portico between shop and assembly rooms, and the Regent’s own entrance on Little Argyll Street at the back of the site, with a private staircase to the royal box above. According to printed programmes, this last door was often opened at the end of a concert ‘for the egress of the Company’. Programmes also reminded subscribers that even at a late night hour, Regent Street had two-way traffic: coachmen were instructed to approach the front entrance always ‘with their horses’ heads towards Piccadilly’, that is, to come down from Oxford Circus rather than turning right from Little Argyll Street.

In the second drawing, showing the first or ‘concert room floor’ (see fig. 18), Nash’s idea for an ensemble of three differently sized performance spaces becomes brilliantly clear, not only suggesting a variety of uses – dining, dancing, private card parties, lectures, plays, chamber or vocal music, orchestral or choral concerts, masquerades, large assemblies – but also presenting an imaginative geometrical solution to the site’s irregular shape: three rectangles, two of them for the small (‘occasional’) hall and the large hall forming a right angle at the lower southeast corner of the site, and the third, to the northwest of these and suggested as a dining or ballroom (with five large windows to Regent Street), rotated slightly east to follow the new street line. In the two wedge-shaped spaces left in between, Nash designed, over the entrance portico, a set of three small connecting rooms to the middle staircase, and, between the small and large halls, an arched and domed oblong anteroom with four decorative columns; intended to be top lit by a glazed skylight – a typical Nash gesture – this space conveniently led to both halls as well as to the main staircase. In perhaps his most remarkable shift away from the previous accommodation, and from projected plans as late as 1818, Nash thus repositioned the main concert hall upstairs at the back of the site, away from Regent Street, turning it north-south and giving a size much larger than before, at c. 104’ x 36’ about twice as long and some ten feet wider than the old concert room, in turn lifting capacity from perhaps 450 people in the old ground-floor hall to 800 in the new upstairs one. The orchestra platform was to be raised four feet above the concert room floor, with steps on either side and a row of four columns behind, near the north wall; against the opposite (south) wall of the room were to be four tiers of private boxes in five bays, screened by a matching set of columns. The ceiling was to be arched. Central heating, ventilation and gas lighting were to employ the most advanced technologies available.

72 Based on interior measurements using Nash’s drawings. In square feet the new concert room was larger than that at Hanover Square; it very nearly approached the size of Willis’s (formerly Almack’s) in King Street, St James’s. Nash’s idea of placing the main hall upstairs arose first from a Philharmonic desire to accommodate larger audiences, but possibly also from a surveyor’s comment at the Slade jury about potential street noise if the new orchestra were placed at ground level near the front of the site.
Fig. 18. Nash’s Plan of the Concert Room Floor, with specifications, enclosed with the RHI’s covering letter to A. Milne, 4 August 1819. TNA: PRO CRES 26/108. With permission.
Dominating the Rooms’ exterior, to the right of the music shop and dining-room range, Nash designed a handsome semi-rotunda. On its upper storey, five free-standing Corinthian columns encircled the apse of the small or ‘occasional’ concert room, its wall containing five tall windows matching the five bays of the colonnade; the whole was surmounted by an eye-catching hemispherical dome with an open balustrade. On the semi-rotunda’s ground storey were five evenly spaced rectangular openings, all windows except for the central doorway. As imagined from early on, this striking feature served an important purpose beyond the aesthetic: it made an effective ‘elbow joint’ at a point where the New Street line changed direction, calling positive attention to the new Argyll Rooms and their positioning rather than making the corner appear awkward. In turn it soon helped to balance the large portico of the imposing Hanover Chapel (1821-5) on the opposite side of Regent Street (fig. 19).74

Hanover Chapel, designed by C. R. Cockerell and consecrated in 1825, was demolished in 1897; Regent House then rose on the same site. The first European flagship store of Apple, Inc., occupied this building from 2004.

Finally on 9 September 1819 the RHI signed a contract with their chosen builder, Alexander Robertson, for the agreed work to be completed by 1 January 1820 for the sum of £7000.75 At the same time, they consulted on lease arrangements for the house north of their site and secured a £2300 bridging loan for the construction cost; their solicitor was Martin Charles Burney, a grandson of Charles Burney.76 During a final crisis of nerves in which Ayrton and

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74 Hanover Chapel, designed by C. R. Cockerell and consecrated in 1825, was demolished in 1897; Regent House then rose on the same site. The first European flagship store of Apple, Inc., occupied this building from 2004.

75 Contract signed 9 Sept. 1819 between Charles Knyvett, Frederick Charles Meyer and Thomas Welsh ‘for and on behalf of themselves and the rest of the members of a Society called the Regent Harmonic Institution’, and Alexander Robertson, builder. The agreement is described within a subsequent contract between the same parties, witnessed by M. C. Burney and dated 4 Dec. 1819, for further work on the ‘Argyle Rooms’, a copy of which surfaced in 1965 and was transcribed by Phillimore & Co. See ‘John Nash and the Regent’s Harmonic Institution’, Blackmansbury, ii (1965), pp. 18-20. Robertson had formerly been in business with William Adam, younger brother of Robert and James Adam; Robertson’s own brother Daniel later became a successful country house designer.

76 M. C. Burney to A. Milne, 9 Sept. 1819 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Burney (1788-1852) was an Ayrton family friend. All members of the consortium had been paying contributions since December 1818 (see n. 58 above); the loan represented about a third of what they needed.
others imagined (or heard a rumour) that Slade might try to build a competing hall elsewhere on the Street – with Nash’s rival developer James Burton scenting the large sum Slade had just won – Nash wrote to reassure his musical friends. He counselled Ayrton to remain calm yet cautious:

My Dear Sir

“Thrice is he armed who has his quarrel just” and under this aegis quit your alarms. I shall be found at my post whenever the Regent’s Harmonic Institution is attacked. You have got the French plays and “let well alone”. When the Lady patronesses shall have approved well your Theatre there will be no hope for Slade & Co. In the mean time a little discretion in your members would do well, and whatever ulterior views they may have, anticipation is not the way to forward them. The Commissioners are bound to protect you & I resolved to do so. The resentful without us cannot receive a new set of public rooms. But when I come to town (which will be on Tuesday next) we will have a general Council and take such measures as shall seem meet. In the mean time I shall not be idle. When I embarked with your society we encountered a storm & lived through it [Slade]. Whenever I go to sea I prepare myself for foul weather and if there is a storm gathering we must trim our sails to receive it. […]

Let the Rooms be built and the good results you wish will follow. […]

Ever my Dear Sir,
Yours faithfully,
John Nash 77

On 30 September 1819 Nash forwarded his final elevation and specifications to Milne. Some days later, after getting Ayrton to clear his ‘music books & some other things’ from ‘the little Countinghouse and the mezzanine room over the front entrance’ (i.e. on the King Street corner), workmen began taking down that part of the building, including an internal staircase. 78

It was a good thing Ayrton had removed the music. When the workers started dismantling the roof, they discovered dry rot throughout the old timbers; the south wall in Little Argyll Street promptly collapsed, ‘being many inches out of the perpendicular (say 26).’ 79 Nash later confirmed to Commissioners that the buildings had indeed been found to be in so bad a state that the whole complex had had to be taken down to its foundations and rebuilt, costing the musicians ‘upwards of twelve thousand pounds’ rather than the expected £7000. 80 Once fresh work began in earnest, however, progress was rapid and an acoustic test in the main hall could be set for 21 January 1820. By the 18th, Ayrton and the committee were pleased to acknowledge advice about their innovative ‘gas apparatus’ for lighting the Rooms, installed by the Westminster Gas Light and Coke Company (predecessor of British Gas). They reassured Commissioners that any fears of inconvenience or danger were groundless: ‘A reservoir for Gas – or Gasometer – the capacity of which is double that of ours, has been, from the commencement of the season,

77 Nash to Ayrton, 28 Sept. 1819, BL, Add. MS. 52339, f. 151.
79 Thomas Welsh to A. Milne, 25 Jan. 1820 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). This letter pled for a rent reduction since the group were facing extraordinary unexpected costs due to the building’s collapse.
80 Nash to Milne, 19 Aug. 1820 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108). Professional building surveys as prerequisite to major renovations became a norm only in the 1970s. Note that Nash’s designs for the enlarged Rooms were finished before any construction work began: they were not a result of discovering dry rot or the need to pull down the old building (an impression conveyed by some accounts). But he probably did add some features or materials not originally specified, once it was clear the structure would have to be completely new; employing more labour, time and materials led to spiralling costs between November 1819 and January 1820.
placed under the centre of the pit in Covent Garden Theatre, and is in constant action, without producing the smallest annoyance, or the slightest alarm in any quarter. Along with Covent Garden Theatre and the original United Service Club (no. 2 Regent Street built by Robert Smirke), the Harmonic Institution hence became one of the first buildings anywhere to enjoy interior gas light. Unconnected with that technical detail but nevertheless symbolic in another way, George III died at Windsor on 29 January 1820.

Although by late February some of Nash’s desired external features still had not been completed – the anteroom dome, a bas-relief on the front wall, the dining room balcony – the building was sufficiently ready for the Society’s opening concert on 6 March (delayed owing to the King’s death). A week before that date, they mounted a trial event, a ‘Grand Concert of Vocal and Instrumental Music’. Besides a full orchestra playing Mozart’s Overture to *Die Zaubernacht* and Haydn’s ‘Tenth Symphony’ (no. 102, in B-flat major), a galaxy of some seventeen solo performers, male and female, took part in vocal, chamber and choral music; eleven were RHI members – Braham, Hawes, the Knyvetts, Nield, Sale, Vaughan, Welsh, the Cramers and Greatorex. The audience was said to be (perhaps optimistically) nearly a thousand people. In a glowing description of the concert and the Rooms, which ‘for magnificence and accommodation, cannot be matched in this or any other city in Europe’, the architectural writer James Elmes recorded Nash’s liberality ‘in rendering his services gratuitously to an Institution, viewing it as one of a public nature, and tending to the advancement of art’. Elmes concluded with a walk round the first floor:

These very splendid rooms consist of a suite of four; a ball room, between fifty and sixty feet long, hung with French crimson flock paper, figured with gold, and lighted by three rich chandeliers; a drawing-room and anti-room, hung with French green flock paper, with flowers of gold; each of the latter has a superb chandelier in the centre, and is richly carpeted and furnished; and the grand concert room is a parallelogram, elongated at one end by the orchestra, and at the other end by four tiers of boxes. The side walls of this saloon are decorated by fluted pilasters of the Corinthian order, and the apertures of the orchestra and boxes are terminated by four majestic columns of the same description. The cornice is ornamented by modillions, the ceiling arched, forming the segment of a circle, and enriched with octangular Mosaic pannels, and with large embossed flowers in each pannel. The hitherto received opinion, that arched ceilings produce echo, and are therefore unfitted for sound, is partly contradicted in the present instance, for not the slightest resonance was heard, and the articulation was perfect; but this, probably, is attributable to the surface being broken by the ornaments that are introduced. The room, however, in the opinion of all the judges present, was pronounced best calculated for music of any yet built. The orchestra is, we understand, only fitted up in a temporary manner, and the boxes are not quite finished. The centre box, which was hung with black, is appropriated to the King. The rooms are warm and ventilated in a novel and very efficient manner, by the Derby process, so named from having been invented and first used by a great manufacturer in that town. By this method a current of continually fresh air, heated or cooled to any moderate temperature, is introduced by a very simple and peculiarly safe apparatus. Amongst many advantages attending this mode of warming, the chief is, that the hall, avenues and staircases, are of the same temperature as the rooms, and that none of the fatal evils, which so frequently occur from being exposed to blasts of cold air, while waiting for carriages, can ensue.

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83 Ibid., pp. 197-8. On the ‘Derby process’, see also Nash to Ayrton, n.d. [early Jan. 1819] (BL, Add. MS. 52339, f. 154), in which the architect unequivocally recommends ‘the Derby Plan’ in answer to the musicians’ doubts. This new heating and ventilation system had first been used in the Derbyshire General Infirmary (1806-19) by its designer William Strutt; it became a model of modern practice for large public buildings.
Another eyewitness, writing in the *Quarterly Musical Magazine and Review*, similarly referred to the ‘noble rooms’ in this ‘splendid suite of apartments’ and noted that the main hall’s proportions were ‘considered to be very fine’. But he disliked the room’s décor: ‘The sides are decorated with gigantic appropriate mythological figures, discreditably painted, and the whole appearance is shewy, but we think cold, and by parts heavy, as to design and execution. The other apartments are far more rich and tasteful.’

The only known surviving image of this interior happens to be a humorous depiction, a few years later, of the demi-monde – fashionable ‘ladies and gentlemen’ at a Cyprians’ ball (i.e. men meeting courtesans) with orchestra; it was contributed by Robert Cruikshank to a serialized social satire in 1825, Charles M. Westmacott’s *The English Spy*. Despite its racy subject, the picture nicely reflects period descriptions (fig. 20).

That writer who disliked the main room’s décor also hinted at origins and cost: the new Argyll Rooms were ‘appended to the other objects of the Regent’s (now the Royal) Harmonic Institution, and prepared at a vast expense’. Exactly how vast would have been appreciated only by insiders, with money matters set to grow worse still. In fact RHI finances took a deep plunge at this very moment, April 1820, when, once the Rooms were safely opened, the first of several membership withdrawals sent the Harmonic Institution into crisis. Whether through disenchantment with the syndicate’s accounting practices and seemingly endless appeals for
money, impatience with the group’s loose artistic direction and personal infighting, or desire to avoid charges of monopolistic intent and double standards, three formerly stalwart RHI members seceded about this time: George Smart, Charles Neate and Ferdinand Ries, who between them sacrificed some £2500 by their move.87 This action then increased the financial burden on the other members, still coping with large debts from banks, builders and other creditors while continuing to run the publishing business. If any one episode could be said to have set off that final crisis, epitomizing dysfunctional RHI management, it must be the following. Charles Knyvett, F. C. Meyer and Thomas Welsh erred badly when, by naivety, over-optimism or poor communication, they paid off the original builder, Robertson, too early – at some point in November 1819. In effect, they spent the full £7000 before the building was even half finished, indeed when costs were bound to rise owing to the wall’s collapse. In turn, an extra £2000 they then paid in increments to Robertson by an additional contract of 4 December 1819 still did not cover the necessary work. Robertson simply disappeared and Nash had to hire a new builder, incurring still more expense.88

Eighteen RHI members hung on until late 1822, when a series of threatened legal actions brought the consortium to its knees; all but two members withdrew, losing nearly £1800 each but passing on their shares (and the debt) to Welsh and William Hawes. These two then managed the Argyll Rooms and the publishing activity from early 1823 to mid-1827, when, Hawes declaring bankruptcy to force his own release, Welsh became sole possessor of the Rooms. He carried on alone for several more years, having mortgaged the property to the banker Rowland Stephenson. In all, more than £30,000 of members’ private money (nearly £1.3 million in 2005) went into the project without anyone in the RHI ever owning a productive share in the Rooms or the publishing business. Ayrton always believed that the scheme had been well conceived and would have succeeded had the RHI been established on a firm legal foundation and managed ‘with but common sense’.89 Yet though rightly angry, he was mistaken in seeing the goal as having been mainly speculative. As a real estate investment the project failed, true enough. But as a building, a place for music and musical engagement, the new Argyll Rooms succeeded beyond any doubt, though for a mere ten years. Its sudden loss through fire would be fully remedied only with the opening of St James’s Hall (1858-1905) in the same street nearly thirty years later, that gap of time just slightly concealing an overlap of entrepreneurs

88 [Horsley], ‘April, 1820’, op. cit., p. 385. William Horsley was an original RHI member.
87 In the second volume of Sir George Smart’s papers, ‘Events in the life of George T. Smart’ (BL., Add. MS. 41772, f. 41), the following entry is found at 22 April 1820: ‘Separation from “The Argyll Institution” (with Messrs. F. Ries & Neate) I signed the Deed of Separation this day upon giving up all I had paid in, which I suppose was £700.’ According to a letter Ries wrote to his friend Spohr two years later (30 April 1822), he had sacrificed £1000 (Cecil Hill (ed.): Ferdinand Ries: Briefe und Dokumente (Bonn, 1982), pp. 160-1). Ries’s larger estimate may have included fees, materials or publication contributions not reckoned by Smart. In their letter of 24 February 1823 to the Commissioners, Welsh and Hawes explained that ‘three of the members seeing the storm gathering, retired’. Referring specifically to RHI financial practice as the source of disagreement, i.e. large payments made to a range of composers whether in or outside the shareholding syndicate, the letter continued: ‘For want of proper legal regulations the Society soon got into disorder; every one felt himself at liberty to direct; jealousies were engendered and the consequences may be easily anticipated’ (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).
88 ‘Extracts from the Diary of a Dilettante’, op. cit., p. 31. Ayrton’s view is coloured by its immediate circumstance, the fire of 5 February 1830.
between the two projects, notably among the Beale and Chappell families. As a publishing body, the RHI was more controversial, even radical: it delivered perhaps a greater proportion of cash earnings directly into producers’ hands than any conventional music publisher had done before, approaching the idea of what since has become known as a composers’ cooperative. Building and publisher can thus both be seen as more historically important, influential in unsuspected ways, than their short lifespans might otherwise suggest. Their existence flagged a developing market for music, their precise location a potent new cultural identity.

A Place for Music

Throughout the 1820s, the Argyll Rooms fairly bubbled with events. The high artistry associated with performances there and a spreading excitement about orchestral music meant that the Philharmonic Society’s selectivity in audience makeup had to be strictly enforced, so keen were new listeners to get in. Printed programmes regularly carried this warning: ‘The Subscribers are most earnestly entreated to observe, that the Tickets are not transferable, and that any violation of this rule will incur a total forfeiture of the subscription’ (italics original). Clearly no one in authority saw the wider London public as a necessary or even potential market for open ticket sales at this time: that would take decades. Moreover, although the Society’s founders might be disappointed in not meeting some of their other objectives, the Argyll Rooms at last now displayed their prestige, embodied their original score library, and lifted modern instrumental music to clear attention in British culture. The very building itself helped bring London music to the supreme national and international recognition it achieved in this period.

In 1820, besides eight Philharmonic concerts on Mondays, six of them featuring the celebrated visiting composer-violinist Ludwig Spohr and another the British première of Beethoven’s First Piano Concerto (played by Charles Neate, conducted by Ries), the RHI gave a separate series of six subscription concerts on Thursdays, the ‘Argyll Concerts’, using Philharmonic singers and players. Grand masquerades, benefit concerts and, by summer 1820, General meetings of the Philharmonic Society began to fill out the diary, with Directors’ meetings added from December 1820. Approval of the new building ran high: the crush at Philharmonic concerts in 1820 was so great that the number of subscribers for 1821 had to be reduced to 650. Programmes for each concert were posted in the shop on the Saturday before the event, in the ‘Lower Saloon, Argyll Rooms’, nos 246-52 Regent Street, where dozens of new pieces of RHI sheet music also appeared. Meanwhile young musicians began to hire the drawing room (occasional hall) for more intimate vocal and instrumental evenings. RSM Anniversary dinners took place in the ballroom every May or June from 1821 onwards. In the main hall even ‘rehearsals’ attracted interest. Angelica Catalani’s Saturday-night rehearsal for her triumphant London return on Monday 16 July 1821, after a seven-year absence, garnered as much attention as her opening concert. The decorative bas-relief intended by Nash for

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91 ‘It is well known that larger sums have been uniformly given by this Society […] than ever were given by any publishers for similar works’ (T. Welsh and W. Hawes to the Commissioners, 24 Feb. 1823, TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).


93 For vivid descriptions of two quite different events billed as masquerades here in 1821, see the lengthy Times advertisement ‘Argyll Rooms—Grand National Festival—Splendid Venetian Carnival and Magnificent Masquerade, in Honour of His Majesty’s Birthday’ (26 Apr. 1821) and the Times review, ‘Argyll Rooms—Thursday Evening’ (29 Dec. 1821). See also George Hunt’s print, ‘Masquerade, Argyll Rooms’ (1826), which depicts a party in the apse of the ground-floor main room (BM Satires 15182).


95 The rehearsal was on 14 July 1821. With Catalani perceived as ‘the first singer in Europe’, her reappearance was ‘among the few benefits arising out of the coronation’ (The Times, 16 July 1821).
his long panel on the Rooms’ exterior, above the dining room, was in fact never executed. In November 1821 RHI shareholders requested permission to substitute the words ‘Royal Harmonic Institution’ in the panel, but that name was ultimately placed instead round the semi-rotunda at ground level.\(^96\) By 1822 the building had become a reference point for other businesses – a new chemist at 220 Regent Street, ‘near the Argyll Rooms’, or a sale of antique furniture, ‘opposite the Argyll Rooms’. From any angle, music had arrived.

Although charity concerts, ventriloquists, puppet shows, conjurors, plays and the inevitable masquerades ensured that a deeper cross-section of Londoners than those approved for Philharmonic Society membership had access to the venue, it was still the Philharmonic concerts that gave the Rooms their cachet. Among the most impressive single events to occur in the building were these: a young Franz Liszt, aged 12, giving a benefit concert on 21 June 1824 (he would first appear for the Philharmonic Society three years later, playing a J. N. Hummel concerto); the Society’s much-discussed inaugural performance, on 21 March 1825, of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, the ‘Choral’ (conducted by Sir George Smart), which they had commissioned from the composer in late 1822;\(^97\) Carl Maria von Weber’s appearance on 3 April 1826, conducting four of his own works as well as Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony for the Society; and the young Félix Mendelssohn’s first-ever London appearance, on 25 May 1829, when he conducted the première of his Symphony no.1 in C minor (later dedicated and given to the Society). The high status of the place was palpable.

Of course not every projected activity was forthcoming. The well-stocked subscription library where patrons and students might have consulted a range of historical and modern scores and treatises seems not to have materialized (difficulties can be imagined). Nor is there any evidence of a music circulating library operating from the Rooms, though other ones were run by individuals or publishers with an affiliation to Society members,\(^98\) and, later, a prominent if short-lived music circulating library was set up at 214 Regent Street by Louis Jullien as part of his ‘Royal Conservatory of Music’.\(^99\)

Most regrettable, the Society’s expected music school, once envisaged as a Philharmonic constituent to help regulate entrance to the profession, cultivate playing expertise and reward outstanding composers, did not come to fruition. On their second try at this objective in late 1821 and early 1822, reserving ‘Royal Academy of Music’ specifically for the teaching body they hoped to establish, the Society at first made excellent progress. They gained written approval

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\(^96\) See Charles Ollivier [temporary Rooms manager] to Commissioners, 6 Nov. 1821 (TNA: PRO CRES 26/108).

\(^97\) A decision to commission the composer was made in late 1822, the money sent in early 1823. Beethoven’s score arrived in December 1824, bearing in his hand the words ‘geschrieben für die philharmonische Gesellschaft in London’. See Arthur Searle, ‘The First British Performances of Beethoven’s “Choral” Symphony: The Philharmonic Society and Sir George Smart’, *Electronic British Library Journal* (2010), art. 4, pp. 1-30. URL: http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2010articles/article4.html.

\(^98\) Notably by Lewis Lavenu, Charles Mitchell, Chappell & Co., Charles Ollivier and Novello & Co. See Alec Hyatt King, ‘Music Circulating Libraries in Great Britain’, *Musical Times*, cxix (1978), pp. 134-5, 137-8. Large music circulating libraries were also operated throughout the 1820s and beyond by Birchall & Co. at Old Bond Street, and by Boosey & Co. at Holles Street (Cavendish Square) and Broad Street, Royal Exchange (in the City).

\(^99\) Listed in directories or known by advertisements, 1845-58. Jullien’s institution combined, as the Philharmonic Society’s might have done, music teaching and publishing with a library. The stock of Jullien’s library was purchased by Trinity College London in 1878 and still forms part of the Jerwood Library at Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance. See Emma Greenwood, ‘Wild Ambitions: Louis Jullien and his Musical Circulating Library’, Exhibition catalogue, Jerwood Library of the Performing Arts (20 April – 7 June 2012).
in principle from the King’s private secretary, Sir Benjamin Bloomfield, in December 1821. George Smart and his Philharmonic subcommittee then tabled a detailed prospectus that was discussed and carefully revised between January and June 1822 and finalized by early July. Behind the scenes, however, completely unknown to anyone in the Society, a competing plan won the upper hand at a fickle court, probably through a combination of Bloomfield’s royal demotion that spring and the parallel, knowing machinations of N. C. Bochsa to influence John Fane, Lord Bourghey, towards an English conservatory on the Paris model, with himself – Bochsa – as head. Bochsa and Bourghey triumphed. The conflict engendered by this upper-class amateurs’ ambush of the music profession – not to mention the disastrous approach to music training it fostered at the Tenterden Street premises of the new Royal Academy of Music from 1823 – can be followed in the contemporary press, contradicting later glossed-over reports of the Academy’s foundation. Eventually some Philharmonic professionals were brought on to the staff at the school, but alliances were uneasy and management poor for a long time, setting back serious music training in Britain, including performance and composition, by decades. The dispiriting effect must have been considerable. Together with RHI difficulties around the same time, this episode fairly finished off the Society’s hope of achieving any wider aims, including Royal Academy of Arts status or anything like it. Concert-giving to exhibit musical excellence – promoting seven or eight events each spring, using international stars – thenceforward became the Philharmonic Society’s settled single objective.

By the time fire destroyed the Rooms seven years later, on the night of 5-6 February 1830, other practical ideas from 1813 had put down separate roots and the Society’s identity was secure. Losing their splendid new premises still had a devastating impact, however, and there were consequences. One was that in the early Victorian era, London would lag far behind many British regional cities in erecting an adequate public space for music performance. Another was that the Philharmonic Library of manuscript scores, parts, minute books and letters would not find a permanent home again until the twenty-first century, ensuring good care, coordination and security for what by any standard was a collection of impressive and increasing archival value. The miracle is that in 1830 this early material was saved (for a second time, after the Rooms’ collapse in 1819). According to news reports, fire broke out between 10 and 11 pm on 5 February 1830; owing to severe cold weather, water was difficult to access, manual fire engines froze and the flames spread rapidly. A new steam fire engine was called on (for the first time in London), and performed so well that a water jet of from thirty to forty tons an hour was thrown completely over the building’s dome, a height of eighty feet, for nearly five hours. While two firemen worked the engine, several musical friends and the Philharmonic violist William Sherrington ran to the scene: Sherrington helped convince police that the locks

100 ‘Upon the prospectus of the Royal Academy of Music being submitted to the King, by the present Philharmonic Directors, served in the written paper, the King will be disposed to give it His Support & Protection’, Benjamin Bloomfield to Sir George Smart, 24 Dec. 1821 (BL, Add. MS. 41771, f. 38v).
101 For details see Leanne Langley, ‘Sainsbury’s Dictionary, the Royal Academy of Music, and the Rhetoric of Patriotism’, in Bashford and Langley (eds.), Music and British Culture, op. cit., pp. 65-97, esp. 73-80. There was a Philharmonic suspicion that their own infighting might have been to blame at some level, given a prevailing view in high places that only the British army or the aristocracy could be trusted to manage such an institution. But whatever the cause, there is little doubt that professional music leadership for the Academy was deliberately scuppered.
103 Birmingham, Belfast, Bradford, Liverpool and Manchester all preceded London in having such a space. The problem was to do partly with London’s lack of a municipal identity which might have generated civic pride, and partly with the costs and risks in building a large hall. See Christina Bashford, The Pursuit of High Culture: John Ella and Chamber Music in Victorian London (Woodbridge, 2007), pp. 217-22.
to the Library cupboards should be broken and the music rescued. By 4 am the fire was subdued, preserving nearby houses and businesses. A clear cause of the fire was not established, though two possible explanations circulated – that a large oven used for the conjuring act of M. Xavier Chabert, the ‘Fire-King’, had overheated; and that heating preparations for a concert in the Rooms had gone wrong. Whatever the truth, the music went on: Philharmonic concerts transferred swiftly to the King’s Theatre, Haymarket, for 1830 and two successive seasons, then moved to Hanover Square Rooms for the seasons 1833-68. From there they shifted to St James’s Hall for 1869-93, and thence in 1894 to the commodious new venue in Upper Regent Street – Queen’s Hall, Langham Place, opposite the Langham Hotel.

Nash’s new Argyll Rooms had been insured for £15,000. After the fire, understandably, no one rushed in to build another big hall; the necessary will, courage and cash, and another suitable location, would take years to emerge. In the interim Thomas Welsh erected six houses with shops on the burnt-out site, keeping the corner unit no. 246, rebuilt with semi-rotunda, columns and balcony, as a music shop for himself until 1836. The same building would eventually house businesses from mourning wear and studio photography to millinery and dressmaking, including Mme Emelie’s, in the bow-fronted shop. From at least 1840, its southerly neighbours across Little Argyll Street included a group of fur companies, together with the predecessor of Dickens & Jones, the well-known department store which expanded and remained here until 2005 (fig. 21). George IV, meanwhile, had died in June 1830. John Nash, his reputation impugned over expensive remodelling of Buckingham Palace and bitter accusations of jobbery, died in May 1835.

With their architect’s name so quickly besmirched, their training aim lost and the damaging RHI splits, no wonder a Philharmonic insider evidently edited official papers to ensure a simpler founding story, one with a single purpose around orchestral concerts – simpler, but shorn of all the genuine ambitiousness. Many decades later during the modern reconstruction of Regent Street, a completely new building on the Little Argyll Street corner, christened Argyll House, became home in 1917 to the Regent Street branch of Union of London & Smiths Bank, which, after further name changes, from 1970 became National Westminster Bank. Today it remains a busy branch of NatWest Bank, refurbished as part of the latest Crown Estate drive to preserve heritage and stimulate trade. For his part, Nash has steadily gained fresh respect from architectural historians since Summerson, notably from Geoffrey Tyack who in 2004 recognized Nash as ‘one of the most creative and influential of all British architects’.

Well before 1917 all trace of any musical connection, let alone of the first Philharmonic in Europe, had long vanished from the historic Little Argyll Street corner – though not from Regent Street itself, which from the beginning offered fertile ground for development of the British music industry in an international context. By the late twentieth century more...
Fig. 21. Exterior view of no. 246 Regent Street as rebuilt in 1830, photographed in 1898 with Dickins & Jones immediately to the south. City of Westminster Archives Centre. With permission.
than 200 music businesses and organizations had set up in and around the area – British and foreign music publishers, piano dealers, string-, brass- and wind-instrument builders, harp manufacturers, music engravers and printers, concertina makers, pianola and organ companies, small and large concert rooms, symphony orchestras, gramophone and record shops, antiquarian music dealers, concert ticket offices, recording studios, artist agencies, music colleges and broadcasters. Nash’s new Argyll Rooms led the way, consolidating an earlier musical presence by way of the Italian opera house near the bottom of the street and Hanover Square Rooms immediately to the west, and presaging all kinds of post-nineteenth-century music activity including even that of the British Broadcasting Corporation in Langham Place. The location of BBC Broadcasting House itself, an iconic modern building opened in 1932 on one of the most oddly shaped sites in London, had indeed been chosen partly for its proximity to Queen’s Hall, the city’s orchestral venue of choice from 1895 and a superb ready-made broadcasting studio. Queen’s Hall, in turn, had replaced St James’s Hall, opened in 1858 in the south-westerly space behind Nash’s Quadrant (now occupied by Le Méridien Piccadilly) through a company spearheaded by the Cramer, Addison & Beale and Chappell firms, together with private shareholders, many of them professional musicians or concert-givers. The repeating synergies were no accident. Those three successive buildings – the Argyll Rooms, St James’s Hall and Queen’s Hall – formed the backbone of London’s classical-music productivity across nearly 130 years, supported by far-reaching artistic, social and commercial networks spanning out from Regent Street. Their collective contribution to the British economy, quite apart from their cultural value, surely exceeded what Nash and the Crown Commissioners ever imagined in 1813, justifying belief in a productive symbiosis between music performance and the music trade. More striking, the in-house orchestra at Queen’s Hall that by 1900 made serious music viable and attractive for truly public audiences year-round gained an advance that no one in 1813 could have dreamt of – a broadening for both music and the makeup of audiences that would continue beyond the twentieth century, not least through the BBC.

What diffused Regent Street’s strong musical character is another story, involving wider economic, social and political currents in the metropolis from the 1880s to the 1960s. The salient point about Nash and the Philharmonic Society is that they got there first and set the pattern in motion, not only creating a physical place for high classical music at the heart of urban consuming culture, but also, through the prescience of individual members, establishing the cradle of so much intellectual and professional music development. Lobbying the British Museum for systematic collecting of printed music from international sources; developing a critical discourse on music joined to encyclopaedic historical information and affordable printed music in the monthly press; stocking a range of makers’ musical goods in one location adjacent to a hall of live demonstration; envisaging methodical study of music history based on theoretical works as well as on manuscript and printed scores: all these initiatives spilled over from Philharmonic energies around the Argyll Rooms and, eventually, had fruitful outcomes. If building the Rooms caused unforeseen headaches and genuine losses for early members, at least we can appreciate their efforts more acutely and glimpse their lives as real people through this episode. Ayrton, Clementi, Ries, Dance, John Cramer, Smart and the rest were not the reductively conservative or pompous figures conventional history has tended to invoke for early nineteenth-century British music. Always variegated, they were by turns focused, sceptical and determined, fearful, jealous and frustrated. Opening up details of their collaboration with

109 Lewis Foreman, ‘Musical Infrastructure of Regent Street and Adjacent Streets in the 19th and 20th Centuries’, unpublished paper with handout, presented 9 May 2011 at ‘Music in Britain: A Social History Seminar’ (Institute of Historical Research, University of London). Foreman’s detailed geographical listing of businesses and institutions covers, besides Regent Street itself, Great Marlborough Street, Old and New Bond Streets, Conduit Street, Argyll Street, Hanover Square and Hanover Street, but not Oxford Street, Wardour Street, Newman Street or Berners Street.

Nash helps to show why, throwing the spotlight on a set of deeper ambitions, achievements and disappointments than tradition records.

Nash’s loose compositional style as an architect, finally, his optimism and positive gift for joining aesthetic with economic utility, might all seem an unlikely fit for the high-flown Philharmonic Society, with their designedly serious goals and tight control. But a closer look, and the evidence presented here, shows how in tune these two parties were. Each needed the other to achieve something bold and sweeping; each would face financial and structural challenges, even devastating criticism, before and after their targets were reached. Yet together they took the first steps at a crucial time in metropolitan development to bring serious instrumental music centre stage in London, detaching it from opera house, theatre and tavern alike to occupy a high middle ground in the new West End. Despite all difficulties, the decision made on 24 January 1813 and followed through on 6 February was unquestionably the right one at the opportune moment. Another Nash hallmark was his flair for making the best of adversity, turning problems to advantage and getting on with the job. The Philharmonic Society of London, now 200 years young, could not have hoped for a better founding partner.