

Book Launch

Denise Yim: *Viotti and the Chinnerys:
a Relationship Charted through Letters*

On 19 October 2004 the Arts Association sponsored the launch of a new book by Dr Denise Yim of the Department of French Studies. The Launch was introduced by Emeritus Professor Angus Martin, President of the Association. Dr Yim's address is given here.

Viotti and the Chinnerys is about the extraordinary relationship of the famous eighteenth-century Italian violinist Giovanni Battista Viotti with a virtually unknown and unremembered English family called the Chinnerys. As the title suggests, the book is entirely based on letters: a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscript letters known as the Chinnery Family Papers. Although the Chinnerys are little known today, they were quite a prominent family in Georgian and Regency England. They counted among their friends members of the British royal family and English and French aristocracy. Adolphus Frederick, Duke of Cambridge, the youngest son of George III, was a particular friend of Margaret Chinnery, and Viotti gave him violin lessons. They also had friends in the foremost musical, literary and artistic circles of the day in both London and Paris. Names that spring to mind in the musical circles are Haydn, Cherubini, the celebrated double bass virtuoso Domenico Dragonetti, and vocalists Giuseppe Naldi, Angelica Catalini and Giuseppina Grassini. In literary circles Mme de Stael, Mme de Genlis, and Thomas Moore; in artistic circles Thomas Lawrence, Mme Vigée-Lebrun, the miniaturists Richard Cosway and Giovanni Trossarelli; and the great London connoisseurs and collectors Richard Payne Knight and Thomas Hope.

The book is a reworked version of the first part of my PhD thesis—although the thesis part of it is practically unrecognisable

now. Writing this book has given me much pleasure for a number of reasons, not least of which is that the manuscript letters on which it is based are all in Sydney. To have such a collection of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century manuscripts here in Sydney has never ceased to amaze and delight me. About half of the letters on which the book is based are in Fisher Library. The Fisher Library collection of Chinnery letters is particularly dear to me because I uncovered them in a private art gallery in London while doing research for my PhD in 1996. It was a most exciting find, since the gallery owner had no idea what the six boxes of letters he had had in his basement for the past 30 years contained. I'm sure Angus Martin remembers my excitement when I made the midnight call from London to tell him about the find. Included in this collection is the very valuable cache of Mme de Genlis letters, which I published in 2003 as *The Unpublished Correspondence of Mme de Genlis and Margaret Chinnery*. In 1997 Fisher bought the collection from that gallery.

The other half of the Chinnery papers on which the book is based is in the Powerhouse Museum. (Chapter 11 of the book does draw heavily on the Christ Church, Oxford, collection of Chinnery letters, but Fisher Library has microfilm copies of the collection.) It was back in 1993 that Dr Peter Orlovich, history lecturer at the UNSW, told me about the Chinnery papers at the Powerhouse Museum. I was doing a course in archives management at the time, and I was to put the papers in some kind of order so that they could be used by scholars, since they had hardly been looked at since the time of their donation to the Museum in 1972. Little did Peter know what he was setting in train. This Chinnery research has turned out to be my life's passion. The papers were donated to the Museum by a great Australian philanthropist, Ernie Crome, who also donated a huge amount of manuscript material to the National Library in Canberra. Crome's collection interests were quite eclectic. They included philately, aviation and music. He gave the papers to the Powerhouse Museum to complement the Museum's violin collection. The manuscripts chronicle the Chinnery family lives

from 1793 to 1840, when Margaret Chinnery, the family matriarch, died. I became so engrossed in reading these papers that I could not bear to part with them at the end of my two weeks as a volunteer cataloguer. This is what decided me to do the PhD thesis. The Powerhouse Museum collection contains the largest number of Viotti letters to have been discovered in the past century. There are over one hundred. To a musicologist it is a goldmine.

Giovanni Battista Viotti

Giovanni Battista Viotti (1755–1824) was a Italian violinst and composer who at the peak of his fame was hailed as a musical genius. A synopsis of his life might go something like this. In 1755 a baby is born in the tiny Piedmontese village of Fontanetto Po, in Northern Italy, then the Kingdom of Sardinia. He is the son of a horn-playing blacksmith, and is given a violin for his eighth birthday. He displays such a precocious talent that at the age of eleven he is recommended to a prominent Turin aristocrat, the Marchesa di Voghera, whose son, the Prince dal Pozzo della Cisterna, is in need of a musical companion, someone presumably with whom he can practice his violin playing. The eleven-year-old child is taken from his parents and placed in the Cisterna Palace in Turin. Here he is given violin lessons by the most famous violinist in Turin, Gaetano Pugnani. He is also given an education fit for a prince.

After an unremarkable few years playing in the King of Sardinia's chapel orchestra and in the Teatro Regio, the 25-year-old violinist embarks on a European tour with his teacher Pugnani, but soon eclipses him. This is well illustrated by an anecdote, possibly apocryphal, possibly not. (If the story is antedated by a couple of years it is highly plausible.) The two violinists are said to have paid a visit to Voltaire, at Ferney in Switzerland, then the Duchy of Savoy, just over the Alps from the Kingdom of Sardinia. While giving their performance before the great philosopher, the two violinists are surprised to hear Voltaire directing all his praise to Viotti, persistently, and undoubtedly mischievously, addressing

him as the celebrated Pugnani. This could not have been an unintentional mistake, as Pugnani was clearly identifiable by his outsized nose, which was frequently caricatured in drawings of the day. Pugnani, understandably, was a little piqued by this lack of esteem for his talent, and famously remarked afterwards '*votre Voltaire est une bête; il ne sait que faire des tragédies*'. ('Your Voltaire is an idiot; the only thing he knows is how to write tragedies.')

By 1782 Viotti is in Paris, where his debut performance at the Concert spirituel causes a sensation. One of the first in Paris to use a Stradivarius violin and the new straighter and longer Tourte bow, he is able to produce sounds on his violin never before heard. A typical comment from contemporary reviewers was that his playing was filled with passion and soul, and indeed many of his performances throughout his life have reduced his audiences to tears. He is hailed as the first violinist in Europe. But his public performing career lasts only two years. At the height of his fame, unhappy with fickle Paris audiences, he abruptly ceases performing in public. He is then made first violinist to the Queen, Marie-Antoinette, but again quits the post within two years, allegedly because of bad-mannered courtiers. Henceforth he performs only at private musical societies and soirées, and devotes himself to composing and teaching. He founds a new violin-playing method, which is taken up by his disciples, and passed down through generations of violinists, to become the one largely used today. He composes 19 of his 29 violin concertos during his ten years in Paris. He also founds a new theatre for the performance of Italian comic opera, under the patronage of the King's brother. But the timing could not have been worse. It is 1789, and the Revolution begins. He struggles to keep the theatre going, but by 1792 his connections with royalty endanger his life, and he is forced to flee France. Like many other emigré musicians he goes to London.

In London he meets the Chinnerys. William Chinnery (1766–1827) is a clerk in the British Treasury. Margaret Chinnery (1764–1840) is an accomplished pianist and a keen concert-goer. They

have three children, twins George and Caroline, born 1791, and Walter, born 1793. The Chinnerys are members of the London gentry. They are, inexplicably, extremely wealthy, and ready to help the glamorous but impoverished violinist. Viotti's gratitude, and the affection in which he holds the Chinnerys can be best described in his own words:

I made the acquaintance of Mr and Mrs Chinnery, two beings who possess the most estimable qualities to a superior degree. Kind, compassionate, faithful friends, in whose excellent hearts no quality was lacking. As soon as I met them I loved them, and as soon as they met me, they reciprocated the sentiment. Since this happy moment I have devoted my life to them. Nothing in the world—society or amusements—held any attraction for me without them, and their home where I lived as a family member, as a brother, has become my own, [the place] where I would have liked to always be, and never leave.

In London Viotti resurrects his performing career, and appears on stage with Haydn at the famous Hanover Square and Opera concerts of 1794 and 1795, where, again, he causes a sensation with his emotion-filled playing. It is probably fair to say that After Haydn, he was the most popular performer in the concerts. But the Revolution continues to dog his life. In 1798 he is unjustly accused by a paranoid British government of having Jacobin sympathies, and is expelled from Britain. He spends about eighteen months in Hamburg before clearing his name, with the help of the Chinnerys, and returning to London.

At this point (at the end of 1799) Viotti moves in with the Chinnerys, and is treated henceforth as a family member. He is like a father to the three Chinnery children, and gives them musical instruction. But in 1812 the Chinnery fortunes take a bad turn. William Chinnery is convicted of a massive embezzlement of Treasury funds, some £80,000. He flees to the Continent, never to return to England. All his assets, including the family home, Gillingwell House in Essex, are sold off. The day William leaves England is the day Caroline Chinnery, his daughter, dies of consumption, aged twenty. His youngest son has already died of

typhoid fever. Viotti remains with Chinnery's wife and what is left of his family—George, twin brother of Caroline, and two young nieces. They rent a house in London. Because of the Napoleonic wars, it is two years before the family is reunited for a summer holiday in Holland. But William has to remain abroad, and Viotti returns to England with his wife. The same pattern recurs each summer, usually in Paris, with the three living contentedly as a happy *ménage à trois*.

Meanwhile Viotti has found it difficult to pursue a musical career, and switches to wine trading. The business fails, and he returns to Paris in 1819 to take up an appointment as director of the Paris Opera. Margaret accompanies him. His health fails and he quits the post after two years. Three years later he dies in Margaret's home in London, penniless. It is a sad end for a musical artist who was known throughout his life as the father of the violin. Viotti composed 29 violin concertos, two symphonies concertantes, and much chamber music.

Most of Viotti's violin concertos have not been heard since the nineteenth century. The ones you are hearing tonight have only recently been recorded in Italy. The one exception is his Violin Concerto No. 22, which was revived by Joachim, and was the favourite concerto of Brahms, who remarked that it was marvellous 'that such a thing could be found in this world'. His violin concertos, in the Classical style of Mozart and Haydn, have been described as the culmination of the genre in the eighteenth century. Today, outside musical circles, Viotti is largely forgotten. He does not deserve to be forgotten. I hope to do a little to remedy the situation by means of this book, and also with a little help from my friends, one of whom is Paolo Hooke. He is a volunteer presenter on 2MBS-FM, and has recently played two of my Viotti sonatas on air.

As for the Chinnerys, the only member of the family remembered today is the artist George Chinnery, a portrait and landscape painter whose portraits now fetch six-figure sums. He was the youngest brother of William Chinnery and, like his older brother, was prone to running into debt and fleeing from his

creditors. As a result, he spent his life in India and on the south China coast, and is better known today in Hong Kong than in any other part of the world. (There is a bar named after him in the Mandarin Hotel in Hong Kong.)

I think every author dealing with manuscripts has some story to tell of chance encounters, and serendipitous events that have influenced their research in some significant way. I have had many, but perhaps the most unusual is the ghost story.

It was the year 2000. I was back in London after visiting New York, where another smaller collection of Viotti/Chinnery letters had just been uncovered. I had been invited to visit the old Chinnery home, Gillwell Park, near Waltham Abbey, in Essex. The property is now owned by the Scout Association. I travelled out to Gillwell on the train with my guide Paul Moynihan, the Scout Association archivist. We were deep in conversation about the history of the house, when Paul looked a little embarrassed, seemed to want to tell me something. He hesitated a little before admitting it was a ghost story. Margaret Chinnery's ghost, he said, had been sighted at Gillwell three times. The sightings were always on the lime walk—an avenue of trees that Margaret had planted herself, in 1809. The last sighting had been only six months previously, when she had been encountered by three young scouts who knew nothing of the history of the house or its owners. They were going along the lime walk, in broad daylight, when they encountered a lady coming towards them. She was dressed in a strange costume, was very pale, and looked ill. Being good scouts, they asked if they could be of assistance, whereupon she vanished.

It was also eerie to learn that the first sighting of Margaret Chinnery's ghost took place in 1993, the year I started reading her letters.

Still in the year 2000, the next stop on this same research trip was Paris. Margaret Chinnery had died in Paris and I knew that she was buried in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, so I paid a visit to the cemetery but, underestimating its enormous size, I could not find the grave. I ran out of time, so before leaving Paris I wrote to the *conservateur* of the cemetery asking for any details he had on

the date of burial, and location of the grave. On my return to Australia I found his reply. Mrs Chinnery and her husband were buried in a vault located on the north-eastern periphery of the cemetery, but as the site had not been visited for 200 years, and had fallen into disrepair, the Paris Department of Parks and Green Spaces was on the point of exhuming the bones and destroying them, to reclaim the much-needed land for the city of Paris. I was appalled that Margaret Chinnery should come to such an ignominious end at the hands of the French bureaucracy, but what to do? I knew how much she had loved Gillwell, so I decided to email Paul Moynihan with the (half-joking) suggestion that the Scout Association might like to consider bringing the bones back to England, and burying them at Gillwell, thereby finally laying the ghost to rest.

To cut a long story short, that is exactly what happened, and the Chinnery bones, cremated, are now safely restored to the family home, buried at the foot of a monument the family had erected in the garden to the memory of their young son Walter. I was invited to the reburial ceremony in August 2001. It was conducted by the rector of Waltham Abbey Church, and was a very moving experience. I presume that Margaret was happy with my exertions on her behalf, since there has never been another sighting of her ghost.