

John Weldon, New College Organist and Composer

To mark the 350th anniversary of the birth of New College organist John Weldon (1676–1736), New College Library has acquired two engraved early printed music scores of his, helping to fill a notable gap in our collections. These are his song ‘Stop, O Ye Waves’ (c. 1700) for voice and continuo (figured bass) with a version for flute, engraved on a folio single-sheet, as well as what is most likely his, and not Henry Purcell’s, very fine semi-opera setting of a libretto by dramatist Thomas Shadwell (c. 1640–1692), *The Music in The Tempest* (c. 1790).¹ Although there has been a renewed focus on him in recent years, John Weldon is still not very renowned today, and his career is perhaps most readily defined in relation to other more famous musicians of his time.

Born 19 January 1676 in Chichester, Weldon obtained his early musical education at Eton College as a chorister under organist John Walter, who had himself received training from John Blow.² Subsequently, for a period from around March 1693 up until 25 March 1694, Weldon took more advanced lessons, funded by Eton, from no less than Henry Purcell, an indicator of Weldon’s genuine early talent. He became organist of New College, Oxford, later in 1694, at the age of 18, thereby succeeding Richard Goodson, Heather Professor of Music at Oxford since 1682, who had moved to Christ Church as organist in 1692. (Or, rather, there was a brief tragic interlude between Goodson and Weldon, when someone with the surname Read had been appointed organist earlier in 1694, who then died by an exceptionally violent form of suicide (self-evisceration) on 18 April.)

Weldon would remain in his New College post until 1702, also composing solo and verse anthems, and songs. The latter includes this single-sheet song, ‘Stop, O Ye Waves’ we purchased this year, one of Weldon’s most celebrated. The sheet gives the song as ‘by’ Weldon, ‘sung’ by Mrs Lindsey, and ‘engrav’d’ by Thomas Cross, the latter capitalising on the reputation for quality and commercial success of Thomas Cross (fl. 1682–1732) as a music engraver. As for Mrs Lindsey, she was mezzo-soprano Mary Lindsey (fl. 1697–1713), always known as Mrs Lindsey, though she was possibly unmarried. She may well have played the trouser role of Orpheus in a masque *Orpheus and Euridice*, composed largely by Weldon’s predecessor, Goodson, for a performance that took place in October 1697 at a girls’ boarding school in Besselsleigh, around five miles from Oxford.³ The masque incorporated this song by Weldon, which Mary Lindsey would therefore have sung during Weldon’s employ as New College organist.

And what do we know of his time at New College? Well, it may not always have been the smoothest of situations. An annual salary (of £50) was paid in termly instalments to Weldon, but these payments were often in arrears, which may account for his being overdue himself in settling his own battels, and why his salary, indeed, once had to be set off against his unpaid battels bills, in 1697.⁴ In any case, we know that, decisively and fortuitously, he took a punt on his own talents at the turn of the century, action which paid off quite unexpectedly, and led to even greater success

¹ *A Song set by Mr. John Weldon, sung by M^{rs}. Lindsey & exactly engrav’d by Tho: Cross* [London, c. 1700], and *The Music in The Tempest: Composed by Mr. Henry Purcell* ([London]: Sold at Messrs. Leigh and Sotheby’s, Booksellers, in York-Street, Covent Garden; and the following Music-shops, Messrs. Longman and Broderip’s, in Cheapside and the Hay-Market; Messrs. Birchall and Andrews, in New Bond-Street; and Mr. Bremners, in the Strand, c. 1790), New College Library, Oxford, at shelfmarks, respectively, of MSRS293 and MSRS291.

² Biographical details are derived largely from Stephen Bullamore, ‘The Sacred Music of John Weldon (1676–1636)’ (PhD thesis, Bangor University, 2015); Alan Howard, ‘Weldon and Music Theatre in 18th-Century London’, from the booklet accompanying the CD of John Weldon, *The Judgment of Paris: A Masque* (Cambridge: Academy of Ancient Music, 2025), pp. 17–21; Margaret Laurie, ‘Weldon, John (1676/7–1736)’, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (3 January 2008) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/28990>> (Accessed: 20 July 2026); Margaret Laurie, revised Stephen Bullamore ‘Weldon, John’, *Oxford Music Online* (20 January 2016) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/gmo/9781561592630.article.30090>> (Accessed: 20 July 2026); and David W. Music, ‘Introduction’ to John Weldon, *The Judgment of Paris*, ed. David W. Music (Madison, WI: A-R Editions, 1999), pp. ix–xiv.

³ See Neal Zaslaw, ‘An English “Orpheus and Euridice” of 1697’, *The Musical Times* 118 (October 1977), 805–8.

⁴ Mr Weldon is listed to the tune of £3. 0. 3. ‘Batill: non Sol.’ (battels unpaid) in the college’s Bursars’ Long Book for 1697–8, New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 4246, recto page preceding p. 1; and the Bursars’ Long Book for 1696–7, NCA 4245, p. 38; cited in Bullamore, ‘The Sacred Music’, pp. 3–4.

A Song Set by M^r John Weldon, sung by M^{rs} Lindsey & exactly engrav'd by Tho: Cross.

Stop, stop, O — ye Waves; Stop, stop, O —

ye Waves, & hear me tell, what Joy, what pains of greif, a Wretch ed Swain be fell,

Then row — wth a way, & rowing to each O ther say, let us Love, let us

Love, let us Love and let us play, in wa — nton murmurs wth we may

For so did once the Thracian Swain, so, so did once y^e Thra — cian Swain, but while y^e thus securely

glide, think, think, think, Oh! think when you come to y^e highest tide, of pleasure you must if divide, as

Orpheus did and far as wide, as Orpheus did and far as wide, far as wide, far as wide, as

Orpheus did and far — as wide, as Orpheus did and far as wide.

For the Flute.

Buc 1085: c. 1700, 3 Ex

beyond Oxford, and to a career in London for our sometime organist. Responding to an advertisement in *The London Gazette* of 21 March 1700, to enter a competition for ‘the Encouragement of Musick’,⁵ which was funded handsomely by members of the Kit-Kat Club (the prominent Whiggish gentlemen’s club) with total prize money of 200 guineas, Weldon went about composing the music for a masque to a setting of William Congreve’s libretto, *The Judgment of Paris*, that Congreve (himself a Kit-Kat member) had written expressly for the purpose. The resulting compositions from four entrants proceeded to the competition’s performance stages at London’s Dorset Garden Theatre in 1701; Weldon, the rank outsider, around half the age of the other three composers, and certainly the least experienced in terms of theatre music, took the first prize (not without some controversy). Shortly after his competition win, on 6 June that same year, Weldon was made a Gentleman Extraordinary of the Chapel Royal. His ‘Stop, O Ye Waves’ song was also published in the *Mercurius Musicus* for May/June 1701, this time described as ‘Orpheus’s Song to the Waves, in the Mask of *Orphus and Euridicy*) Sung by Mrs Linsey. Sett by Mr. William Weldon of Oxon.’⁶ (It seems likely that Mary Lindsey, who certainly sang the role of Juno in a subsequent 1702 performance of Weldon’s *Judgment of Paris*, sponsored by the Duke of Bedford, had also sung that role in the two competition winning performances of Weldon’s same work the year before.)⁷ The *Mercurius Musicus* here misnames Weldon ‘William’ instead of John (though it correctly adds ‘of Oxon.’). But the composer had previously been designated correctly as ‘Mr. Weldon, Organest of New Colledge Oxon.’ for the publication of another of his songs, ‘Inspire Me Love to Raise Thee’, that was printed in the pages of the same publication a year earlier.⁸

Despite its winning the competition, and containing what became a very popular air indeed—‘Let Ambition Fire Thy Mind’ (sung by Juno and the chorus)—Weldon’s musical setting of Congreve’s libretto remained unpublished until 1999.⁹ Just two years ago, the New Chamber Opera performed this masque in New College Chapel, Oxford, but only last year, finally, came the first professional commercial release of the work, a recording of a superb performance by the Academy of Ancient Music and the Cambridge Handel Opera Company (which the library has also acquired).¹⁰ But Weldon’s competition success with the *Judgment of Paris* certainly does seem to have propelled him onto other things, with a relocation to London to pursue his musical career in the capital. He duly resigned his post at New College in 1702, and was appointed organist at St Bride’s in Fleet Street that June. On 11 November of the following year, 1703, he married Susanna Betton, daughter of John Betton, Rector of Lavant (near Chichester), and the couple went on to have a family of seven children.

In London, probably around 1711/12, Weldon composed another semi-opera, *The Tempest*, which proved very popular indeed; Theatre Royal, Drury Lane performances of ‘The Tempest; or, The Enchanted Island. All the Musick compos’d by Mr. Weldon’ of July and August 1716 were

⁵ *The London Gazette* 3585 (18–21 March 1699/1700), p. [2]:

Several Persons of Quality having, for the Encouragement of MUSICK, advanced 200 Guineas, to be distributed in 4 Prizes, the First of 100, the Second of 50, the Third of 30, and the Fourth of 20 Guineas, to such Master as shall be adjudged to Compose the best; This is therefore to give Notice, That those who intend to put in for the Prizes, are to repair to Jacob Tonson at Grays-Inn-Gate before Easter-Day next, where they may be further Informed.

⁶ [John] Weldon, ‘Orpheus’s Song to the Waves’, in *Mercurius Musicus: or, The Monthly Collection of New Teaching Songs*. For May and June (1701), 27–9.

⁷ See Olive Baldwin and Thelma Wilson, ‘The Singers of *The Judgment of Paris*’, in *The Lively Arts of the London Stage, 1675–1725*, ed. Kathryn Lowerre (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), pp. 11–25, at pp. 22.

⁸ [John] Weldon, ‘A SONG Sett by Mr. Weldon, Organest of New Colledge Oxon.’, in *Mercurius Musicus: or, The Monthly Collection of New Teaching Songs*. For September and October (1700), 66–8.

⁹ Weldon’s setting survived in a sole manuscript transcript, made by a professional copyist in the early to mid-18th century, now held in the Folger Shakespeare Library, Washington, DC, at its shelfmark W.b.526; Weldon, *The Judgment of Paris*, ed. Music (1999).

¹⁰ The New Chamber Opera performance in the chapel was on 5 June 2024: <www.newchamberopera.co.uk/2024/01/20/summer-oratorio-2024/> (Accessed: 20 July 2026), with further details held in New College Archives, NCA NCO/B4; the CD of Weldon’s *The Judgment of Paris* is held at our shelfmark NC/WEL.

advertised, notably, in the London newspaper *The Daily Courant*.¹¹ His was a musical setting of text adapted firstly by William Davenant and John Dryden, and later Thomas Shadwell, of Shakespeare's late romance. But the published version, attributed in printed editions from the 1780s onwards to Weldon's great teacher from his boyhood, Henry Purcell, is in fact most likely by Weldon.¹² We have acquired a fine copy of this work, dating from around 1790, a reissue of the Benjamin Goodison first edition, priced 10s 6d, and bearing an imprint label neatly pasted over the original imprint. That the Purcell attribution was, however, accepted for so long is certainly testament to the quality of (what is most likely) Weldon's own excellent composition.

Further London appointments, as second organist of the Chapel Royal in 1708 (upon the death of John Blow), and as organist in 1714 of St Martin-in-the-Fields, solidified Weldon's career beyond Oxford. Possibly a decline (or bad luck), followed by an illness clouding at least his final months, likely accounts for the fact that from 1727 he ended up sharing his duties as assistant organist at St Martin's, and his not being appointed first organist at the Chapel Royal when the post became vacant there upon the death of William Croft. It is pleasing that our library collections are now augmented with early scores of what are two of his most consequential compositions.

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¹¹ *The Daily Courant* 4610 (30 July 1716), p. [2], and 4617 (7 August 1716), p. [2].

¹² Since the publication of Margaret Laurie's 'Did Purcell Set *The Tempest*?', *Proceedings of the Royal Musical Association* 90 (1963–4), 43–57, it has become widely accepted that Weldon was probably the composer of most of this semi-opera.