

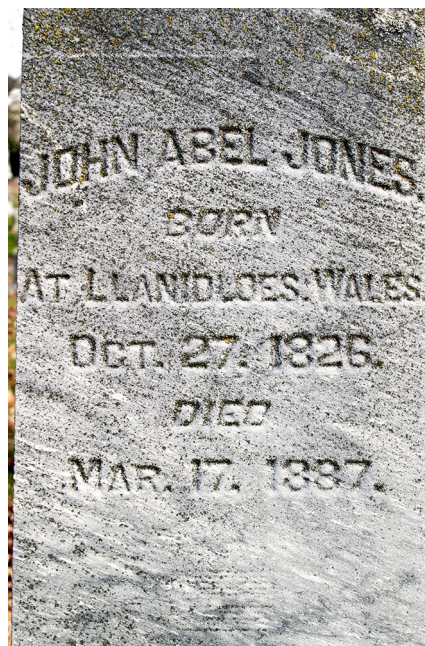
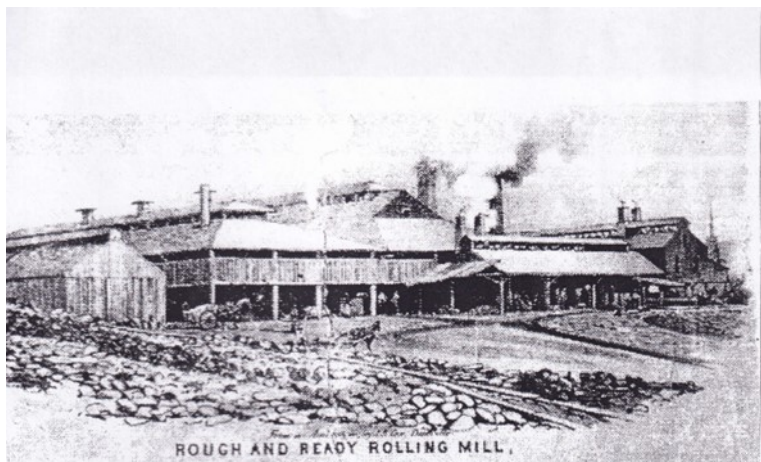
Joseph Parry's First Music Teachers: John Abel Jones and John M. Price

Frank Bott, Aberystwyth, Wales

In 1848, the Cyfarthfa Ironworks in Merthyr Tydfil in south Wales, where Joseph Parry's father worked, opened an elementary school for the children of its employees. Joseph attended that school for two years but according to his autobiography [1, p10], he then started work, first as a pit boy and then in the iron works. The education he received at the school would have been in English, which was also the language of the workplace, but Welsh was the language of the family and of Bethesda Chapel, the centre of their social life. In the Sunday School he learned to read Welsh and, to a limited extent, to write it. Joseph's parents were enthusiastic singers and he sang as a boy alto in performances of some of the great choral works, but he could not read music. So when 13 year old Joseph Parry arrived in Danville, Pennsylvania with his family in September 1854, his education was very limited. How was it, then, that a mere six years later, music he had composed would win prizes at eisteddfodau in Danville and in Fairhaven, Vermont?

Joseph went to work as a 'puddler's boy' in the Rough and Ready Rolling Mill in Danville, where his father worked. One of Joseph's colleagues at the mill was John Abel Jones and he was to become Joseph's first music teacher.

John Abel Jones (1826-1887) was born in Llanidloes, in Montgomeryshire in mid-Wales, the son of Abel Jones, a farm worker, and his wife Dorothy. Their son's birth was recorded on 11 November in the register of the Baptist Church in Llanidloes. The family subsequently moved to Aberdare and thence to Merthyr Tydfil. He married Sarah Evans and they emigrated to America with their daughter Catherine, probably in 1854. He was an enthusiastic singer and the *Pittston Gazette* [2] contains a report (in Welsh) of an Eisteddfod in Pittston, Pennsylvania, that mentions a "Song by John Abel Jones, Esq., Scranton." In 1856 he and his family moved to Danville and in the 1860 census he is recorded as living in Danville with Sarah and four children, aged 8, 6, 3 and 1, working as a 'day laborer.' In the 1870 census he was still in Danville, now employed as a 'heater,' with his wife and only one child. By 1880, he and his family had moved to Columbus, Ohio, and he is again reported as working as a heater. He died in Columbus on 17 March 1887 after being hit by shunting wagons while



John Abel Jones's grave in Green Lawn Cemetery, Columbus, Ohio

taking a shortcut home through a railway marshalling yard. In the press report of his death [3] he is said to have been employed as a fireman by the London Clothing Company. A short obituary in *Y Drych* [4] describes him as a well-known musician and reports that he had lost an eye as a result of his brother dropping him when he was nine months old.

(The John Abel Jones we are concerned with has often been confused with another John Abel Jones, born in the same year, 1826, but in Pen-y-Cae, a small village east of Newport, Monmouthshire. This John Abel Jones became a well-known and well-liked singer and music teacher in the public schools of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. He died on 31 August 1873 and the funeral procession included 90 to 100 splendid vehicles. He is buried in Uniondale Cemetery. There is an obituary (in Welsh) in *Y Tyst a'r Dydd* [5].)

In 1883, some four years before John Abel Jones's death, the *Columbus Daily Times* published an account of an interview with him and this was subsequently reprinted in the *South Wales Daily News* [6]. The article is garbled and contains substantial errors of fact, some doubtless the result of Jones' failing memory and others due to the reporter's lack of understanding or possibly deliberate distortion in the interests of producing a good story. It paints a picture of an old working class man living in near poverty in contrast to his old friend and pupil Joseph Parry, who is enjoying fame and wealth, with "an income of many thousand dollars a year." While it is true that Jones had remained a lowly working man throughout his life, the image of poverty is belied by the substantial monument erected on his grave in Green Lawn Cemetery, Columbus. It is also true that Parry was, by then, comfortably off but he was far from earning many thousand dollars a year.

In Danville, John Abel Jones took the young Joseph Parry under his wing and found his student to be filled with enthusiasm. Every Saturday, Parry went to Jones's house – their homes were opposite each other – for an hour's lesson at 3 pm for a fee of 25 cents. Some of Parry's fellow workers also attended, since Jones's home was open to anyone from the Rough and Ready Rolling Mill who wanted to learn about music. Jones also ran a choir of which Parry soon became a faithful member. In his autobiography [1, p12] he notes that it was there he learned to read staff notation, stating "I am thus seventeen years of age before I can understand a single note of music (though I had sung in several oratorio and Mass performances at Merthyr)." He also learned sight-singing. In fact, his musical enthusiasm was such that Jones would comment: 'The little devil is at me all the time.'

By 1859 Parry was studying harmony with Jones, working through *A Catechism of the Rudiments of Harmony and Thorough Bass* by James Alexander Hamilton (an English writer and no relation to the James Alexander Hamilton who was the son of Alexander Hamilton, one of the Founding Fathers).

The book is typical of Victorian pedagogy, concentrating on terminology and formal definitions rather than on musical effect, and clearly intended to encourage rote learning. It is (mercifully) brief, consisting of 102 short pages. Notwithstanding the dryness of the book, it seems that Parry worked through it diligently. By 1860, he seems to have learned all that Jones could teach him so Jones recommended him to **John M. Price**, another Welsh musician working in the iron industry in Danville.

According to the obituary in *The Cambrian* [7], Price was born in Dowlais on 8 April 1828, the son of Thomas and Eleanor Price, from Brecon and the Gower respectively. In his autobiography, however, Parry asserts that Price was a native of Rhymney, as does the *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties* [8, pp496-497]. While the autobiography contains many inaccuracies, the fact that, in 1852, Price married Mary Roberts from Tredegar in the church in Bedwellty suggests that Price at least had connections in the Rhymney valley. Sadly, Mary died in 1867, aged 34; she is buried in Odd Fellows Cemetery in Danville.

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It is indicated by the figures ♯, 8, 5, 3, when necessary.

Q. How many kinds of common chords are there?

A. Two principal kinds; the major and the minor. In the first species the third is major, and in the second, minor; in both cases the fifth must be perfect.

Q. Will you exemplify these chords?

A. The following example contains both the major and minor common chords, with the three usual arrangements, or positions, of the notes in the right hand.



Q. On what degrees of the scale do common chords usually occur?

A. On the first degree or tonic, the fourth degree or subdominant, and the fifth degree or dominant.

A typical page from Hamilton's *Catechism*



Stones marking the graves of John M. Price and Mary Price in the Odd Fellows Cemetery, Danville.

Photo by Michael Mordan, Danville, Pennsylvania

In contrast to John Abel Jones, John Price had a highly successful career in the iron and steel industry. In 1862, along with William Lewis, he was granted a patent for an improvement in piles for railroad rails (U.S. Patent 36795) and he was granted several more patents over the next 30 years. As census records show, by 1870 he was foreman in an iron works in Syracuse, New York; by 1880 he was living at King's Bridge (now Kingsbridge) in the Bronx and described as 'Superintendent.' According to the *Historical Annals*, Price retired from the iron and steel industry in 1881 to devote all his time to music, "having studied music while young and also while working at his trade," and became "successfully engaged in the music profession in New York City." The report of the interview with John Abel Jones mentioned above describes Price as being a professor of music in New York City but the title 'professor' did not at that time indicate anything more than a teacher, and certainly not a person with an academic position in a university. The 1900 census records his profession as 'piano tuner.' This seems improbable though not impossible but it could well be the result of a musically ignorant census recorder choosing more or less randomly from a list of musical occupations. Price remained in King's Bridge until his death in 1907; the immediate cause of his death was pneumonia but he had been in poor health since suffering a stroke early in 1906. His body was taken back to Danville for burial in the Odd Fellows Cemetery, next to his wife's grave.

Mary Price bore her husband eight children. A daughter, Sarah, died in infancy, but four sons and three daughters survived into adulthood and had successful careers. The eldest son, Thomas J. Price (1855-1923) returned to Danville and became joint owner of the Danville Structural Tubing Company and a prominent figure in the town. He was offered a congressional nomination for Theodore Roosevelt's Progressive Party in the 1912 election but declined it. The next two sons, John T. and George T. became respectively Superintendent and Assistant Superintendent of the Spuyten Duyvil Steel Foundry in New York City, while the youngest son, Frank S., became a lieutenant in the New York City Police and is reported to have served with distinction. Two of the daughters, Mary Ann (Annie) and Jeanette (later known as Janet) became music teachers, although Jeanette later worked as a stenographer at Revere Copper and Brass Inc. in Syracuse, New York. The third, Ella, married Thomas Hoskins and remained in New York City.

Not surprisingly, given his successful career, there is significant documentary evidence relating to Price's life. It is, however, often contradictory and, in some cases, clearly wrong.

The 1860 census records show Price as living in Columbia, Pennsylvania, with his wife and three children, Thomas aged 5 and born in Whales [sic], John aged 3 and George aged 1, both born in Pennsylvania. His occupation is recorded as 'Roller in Mill.' Columbia is about 100 miles south of Danville and was an important centre for iron production. The *Historical Annals* [8, pp496-7] state that John M. Price emigrated to the United States in 1854, initially to New York but moving to Danville later in the same year. Thomas J. is said to have been born in Tredegar on 26 February 1855. This would imply that John left Wales in the second half of 1854 and his wife followed, with the baby Thomas, probably in 1856.

The obituary in *The Cambrian* [7] says that Price and his wife emigrated in 1852, shortly after their wedding, going straight to Danville. This is almost certainly erroneous because it is hard to reconcile with Thomas having been born in Wales, a fact that is well attested.

Not the *Historical Annals*, Parry's autobiography, nor any of the obituaries published at the time of Price's death make any mention of his ever residing in Columbia, Pennsylvania. However, the evidence of the 1860 census record cannot be gainsaid. While census records often contain minor errors such as giving the ages of children incorrectly, it is inconceivable that the census would have translocated a family of five 100 miles from their actual home. A possible explanation is the following.

According to the *Historical Annals*, on arriving in Danville, Price went to work as 'boss roller' at the Montour Rolling Mill and it was not until 1865 that he moved to the Rough and Ready Mill. Although Parry makes it clear in his autobiography [1, p12] that he worked closely with John Abel Jones in the mill for many years, he never states that he worked with Price in the mill; he describes Price simply as a friend of Jones.


There was a severe financial crisis in the United States in 1857. While there were many factors that contributed to the crisis, the immediate cause was the sinking of the *SS Central America* off the coast of the Carolinas in a hurricane in September of that year. Four hundred and twenty five passengers and crew were lost, as well as 14,000 kg of gold from California, worth some \$550 million in today's money. Many railroad companies went into liquidation and the resulting slump in the demand for iron rails hit the iron industry hard. It is possible that, like a number of other iron works, the Montour Rolling Mill was forced to close temporarily, and that Price moved to Columbia to find work but returned to Danville when the Montour Mill reopened. We know from his registration for the Civil War draft that he was certainly back in Danville by June 1863 but he could well have returned in 1861, when the start of the Civil War saw a big increase in demand for iron and steel.

Price agreed to teach Parry every Saturday afternoon, and later at 9 am on Sundays as well. According to his autobiography [1, p14], Parry studied "Dr Marx's harmony book" with Price. This was probably *The Theory and Practice of Musical Composition*, a translation of *Die Lehre von der musikalischen Komposition* by Adolf Bernhard Marx, first published in 1852. While this work is written, like Hamilton's book, in a formal style and was therefore likely to have presented some linguistic difficulty for Parry, given his limited formal education, its author was an experienced and reasonably successful composer and this is evident from its content.


Price's musical strength was harmony, but he was amazed by Parry's apparent ability to hear in his head the effect of written chords. Encouraged by Price, Parry submitted compositions to two Christmas eisteddfodau, at Danville in 1860 and at Fairhaven, Vermont, in 1861. He won the first prize for composition outright at the Danville eisteddfod for his *Temperance Vocal March* (now lost) and shared the first prize at the eisteddfod in Fairhaven for the following hymn tune:

CHAPTER II.
INVENTION OF MONOPHONIC PHRASES.
I.—THE DESIGN AND ITS EFFICACY.


In order to arrive at new progressions we will return now to our first satisfactory phrase (No. 5). We see it constructed of different parts; in the first measures a series of quarter-notes; in the latter quarter and eighth-notes, which lead to the final note. Thus we can distinguish various tone-groups; for instance, a tone-chain of quarter-notes.

9. 

A group ending more satisfactorily is in the latter measures.

10. 

If we are willing to resign a satisfactory ending, we can select still more groups.

11. 

Such forms which contain the germ and the impulse of longer phrases are called *designs*. Each junction of two or more notes can serve as a design. Every composition consists of such designs, and it is for us to consider how we are to nurse these germs, how to apply them, and how to multiply them, in order to arrive continually at new phrases, passages, and periods. The invention of these designs is already sufficiently prepared. The simple scale has given us six, and every new formation adds to that number.
Every design can be applied by itself—

A page from Marx's *Theory and Practice*



The hymn tune with which Parry shared first prize at the Fairhaven eisteddfod in 1861.

As a consequence of his success in these eisteddfodau, and with the support of Jones and Price, enough money was raised to enable Parry to attend a one-term summer music course in Geneseo, a small town on the western edge of the Finger Lakes Region in upstate New York, some 200 miles from Danville. It was not a small step for the twenty-year-old Welshman to leave home and be among strangers for eight weeks. The course, which followed similar successful courses in the previous year, was offered by the Normal Academy of Music, a predecessor of the Wadsworth Normal and Training School, which eventually, in 1948, became part of the State University of New York. Commencing on 3 July 1861, according to the advertisements, the course offered “a Thorough Musical Education.” Parry studied singing with the Academy’s principal, Carlo Bassini, and was taught organ, harmony and composition by Professor T. J. Cook.

Back in Danville, Parry had largely gone beyond what Price could teach him and over the next four years he honed his musical skills and won prizes at eisteddfodau in the United States and in Wales. In 1865, in company with Jones, Price and his brother-in-law Robert James, he attended the Welsh National Eisteddfod in Aberystwyth, where he was honoured by being elected a member of *Gorsedd y Beirdd* [the Gorsedd of Bards], with the apt bardic title *Pencerdd America* [Master Musician of America]. After the eisteddfod, the four singers gave several concerts as a male voice quartet in and around Merthyr Tydfil before returning to Danville.

In 1868 Parry was able to enter the Royal Academy of Music in London, where he studied under its director, William Sterndale Bennett and won bronze and silver medals for composition. In a letter dated 10 March 1869 to Mynorydd (William Davies), conductor of the London Welsh Choral Society, Parry wrote:

“ . . . if I have succeeded in doing anything with music, it is because of these two men, my personal and Creator's diligence ... they were men of extraordinary talents, that did so much for Music, even though they were amateurs.” [original in Welsh, translated by Dulais Rhys]

Amateurs they may well have been, but from the standpoint of their ability to encourage, develop and support a budding young musician such as Joseph Parry, John Abel Jones and John M. Price were worth their weight in gold for their diligence and vision.

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Sources

None of the written sources are totally reliable, not even the census records. The 1860 and 1870 censuses, for example, record John Abel Jones as being a year older than his wife, while the 1880 census records him as being four years younger than her.

- [1] Joseph Parry. *Yr Arwr Bach/The Little Hero*. Edited and translated by Dulais Rhys. National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth. 2004. (Bilingual) Joseph Parry's (sketchy and unreliable) autobiography.
- [2] *Pittston Gazette*, 7 December 1855, p2.
- [3] *Springfield Daily Republic*, 18 March 1887, p1.
- [4] *Y Drych*, 31 March 1887, p4.
- [5] *Y Tyst a'r Dydd*, 3 October 1873, p3.
- [6] *South Wales Daily News*, 18 May 1883, p2.
- [7] *The Cambrian*, March 1907, pp137-8.
- [8] *Historical and Biographical Annals of Columbia and Montour Counties*. Chicago. J.H. Beers Co. 1915. pp xxii+671. An immensely detailed history. It appears to be accurate when dealing with local matters but contains some howlers when dealing with more distant events.