From the 1770s until his death in 1812, JB Malchair, a musician and artist living in Oxford, collected traditional tunes of various nations. His sources ranged from acquaintances at the University to the whistling of boys in the street. Malchair’s collection includes 987 tunes spread across three manuscripts and various publications by his friend, William Crotch.

Malchair’s work stands apart from that of his contemporaries in both content and function. Malchair’s tunebooks provide an audio snapshot of eighteenth-century Oxford — but more than this, his tunebooks form a collection: a conscious effort to organise this material, an activity not attempted by any of his contemporaries.

Viewed as a collection, Malchair’s tunebooks represent a collecting practice in the eighteenth century that has not previously been studied, and which might be said to foreshadow the birth of ethnomusicology a century later.

Musician or collector?
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Malchair’s manuscripts are more than just a musical aide memoire.

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Research focus
With implications for the history of music, ethnomusicology and the history of collecting, this study will investigate how and why Malchair categorised his tunes into national ‘classes’; and analyse his collecting methods and legacy, asking whether he might be considered a forerunner of the better-known collectors of the nineteenth-century English folk music revival.

Sources:
• Malchair’s tunebooks, William Crotch’s transcriptions of Malchair’s tunes
• Crotch’s publications on ‘national music’
• Contemporary tunebooks, such as William Henry Giles’ Bampton manuscript
• Contemporary printed tune collections


Images: background: Malchair’s tunebook ‘Volume III’, pages 106 and 80; top: Malchair’s drawing of Magdalen Tower over the old bridge; bottom: a drawing of Malchair by his pupil, Henry Barnard.