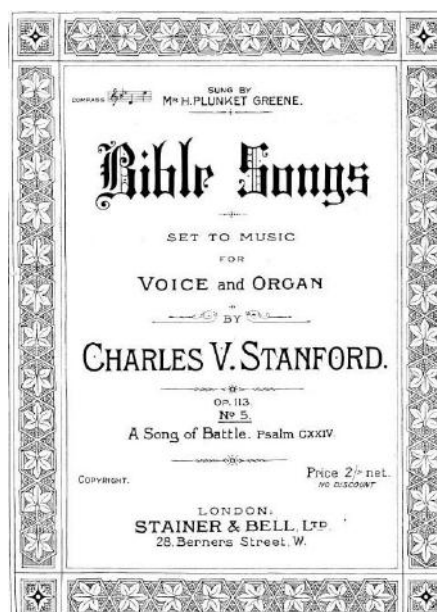


Stanfordian Thoughts

A periodical series of reflections on recorded and unrecorded works by Stanford
by Christopher Howell

20. Six Bible Songs with Hymns op.113

If I have counted aright, Stanford's Six Bible Songs have been recorded complete seven times. Four recordings include the Hymns that Stanford provided as an optional conclusion to each song. In addition, some recent live performances, with or without the Hymns, have appeared on YouTube. A few single pieces by Stanford have now accrued a discography so large as to be almost untraceable in its entirety, and the Clarinet Concerto and Sonata have a goodly presence. The Bible Songs, though, must currently be the most frequently recorded of Stanford's works on a larger scale – a complete performance with hymns takes well over forty minutes, while just the songs last nearly thirty. The earliest recording, issued in 1977, was the first time, unless I have missed something, that an entire LP was dedicated to Stanford. Supplementing these complete performances, single songs, with or without hymns, and single hymns, have been issued on a number of occasions.



The six songs are:

1. A Song of Freedom (Psalm 126: When the Lord turned again the captivity of Sion)
2. A Song of Trust (Psalm 121: I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills)
3. A Song of Hope (Psalm 130: Out of the deep have I called)
4. A Song of Peace (Isaiah 11: There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse)
5. A Song of Battle (Psalm 124: If the Lord Himself had not been on our side)
6. A Song of Wisdom (Ecclesiasticus 24: I came forth from the mouth of the Most High)

In view of certain speculation concerning Stanford's possible sympathies with Catholicism¹, it is curious to note that the text of the sixth song is, according to Protestant thinking, not Biblical, since Ecclesiasticus is part of the Apocrypha. It is, however, accepted as a Biblical text by the Roman Catholic Church.

The six hymns, with attributions as in Stanford's scores, are:

1. Let us with a gladsome mind (anonymous tune², words by Milton)
2. Purest and Highest (tune by Gibbons, words from the Yattendon Hymnal, ed. Robert Bridges)
3. In Thee is gladness (tune by G. G. da Caravaggio³, words translated by C. Winkworth from the German by Lindemann)
4. Pray that Jerusalem (tune from Playford's Psalms, words from the Scotch Psalter)

¹ See Robert James Stove: "You would pluck out the heart of my mystery": Discoveries and Paradoxes in Stanford Related Research, *British Music, the Journal of the British Music Society*, Vol. 43, 2021, pp.1-6 and my discussion of the question in [Article 13 in this series](#).

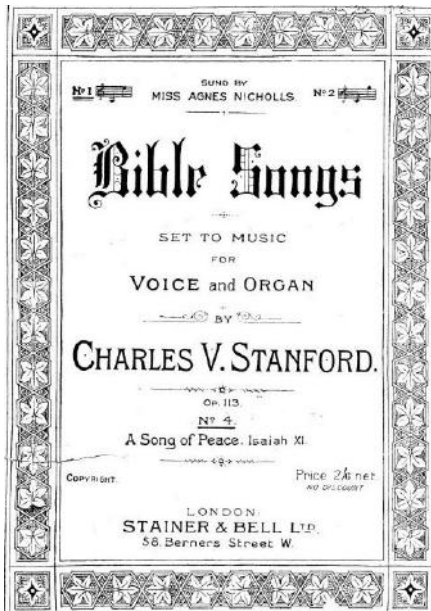
² Since Stanford's time, this tune, *Monkland*, has been identified as by John Antes (1740-1811)

³ Normally identified today as Giovanni G. Gastoldi, though he was in fact born in Caravaggio in Northern Italy.

5. Praise to the Lord (tune from Praxis Pietatis, words translated by C. Winkworth from Neander's Hymn)
6. Oh! for a closer walk with God (tune from the Scotch Psalter, words by W. Cowper)

I will offer further thoughts on what Stanford was aiming to do, and the relationship the *Bible Songs* bear to the *Songs of Faith*, for voice and piano, after an examination of the recordings. These reveal a remarkable range of decisions as to how the music might be performed. Some arise from the nature of the work itself. Others, such as having the songs sung not by solo singers, but by the combined trebles of the choir, find less authority in the scores. Moreover, a study of the literature surrounding the work reveals a number of anomalies. Nothing serious, but whenever Stanford is written about, discrepancies tend to arise, things that would have been sorted out long ago if the music had been written by Brahms or Dvořák or Tchaikovsky. Composers who did not sink beneath the radar after their deaths as Stanford did, only to emerge cautiously more than half a century later, when much information had disappeared.

Origins and publication



All we know is what can be gleaned from the scores. The songs were published, separately, in 1909. The title pages state that nos. 1, 2, 3, and 5 were “Sung by Mr. H. Plunket Greene”, while no. 4 was “Sung by Miss Agnes Nicholls”. Here is our first discrepancy, since Frederick Hudson⁴ states that also no. 6 was sung by Plunket Greene. I can only report that neither of the two second-hand copies I have, for high and for low voice, nor the scanned copy at Internet Archive⁵, bear this legend – I reproduce here the covers of 5, 4 and 6. Maybe a later reprint of no. 6 added it, if in the meantime Plunket Greene had performed it somewhere. This is of significance since, while “Dedicated to X” or “To X” does not necessarily mean that X sang it, “Sung by X” implies that a performance took place. Unfortunately, neither Hudson nor Dibble⁶ nor Rodmell⁷ have traced any, though four years prior to his book, Dibble stated that the Bible Songs were “first performed by his fellow Irishman and future biographer, Harry Plunket Greene”⁸. A second discrepancy. Dibble dropped this claim in his 2002 book, but repeated it in 2010⁹ and 2014¹⁰. In the absence of a location and date, I take this to be a plausible assumption rather than a proved fact.

⁴ Frederick Hudson: *A New Catalogue of the Works of Charles Villiers Stanford 1852-1924*, Compiled from the Original Sources, typescript 1994. Held in the Stanford Collection of Newcastle University and accessible here: https://www.ncl.ac.uk/webtemplate/libraryassets/external/specialcollectionsguide/handlists/stanford_charles_villiers_archive.pdf. Retrieved 13.4.2022.

⁵ <https://archive.org/details/biblesongssettom16stan/page/n79/mode/2up>, retrieved 22.9.2023.

⁶ Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press, 2002

⁷ Paul Rodmell: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate, 2002

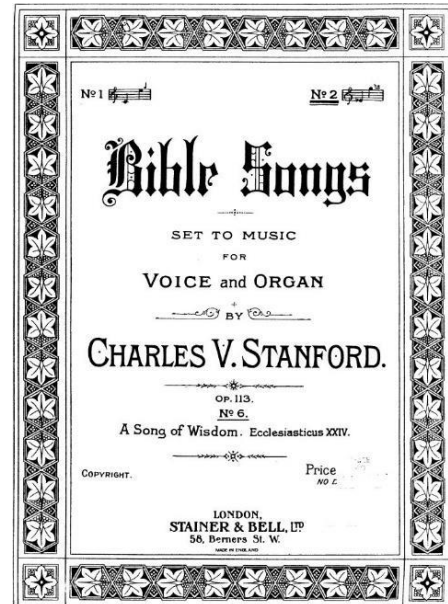
⁸ Jeremy Dibble: booklet notes for *Stanford: Sacred Choral Music Volume 2*, Hyperion CDA 66965, 1998.

⁹ Jeremy Dibble: booklet notes for *Stanford: Choral Music*, Delphian DC 4087, 2010. These notes seem identical to those for the 1998 Hyperion CD.

¹⁰ Jeremy Dibble: booklet notes for a CD of Stanford's church music including the last Song and Hymn, Convivium CR027.

There is, moreover, internal evidence that the high voice version of the sixth song is the original. The evidence is strongest in the hymn that follows – *Oh! for a closer walk with God*. Stanford took care that each hymn was in the same key as the preceding song. The low key version of *Oh! for a closer walk* has a pedal part that descends, on the last page, to a bottom B flat, a note not normally available on the organ and which Stanford never used elsewhere in his organ parts. The conclusion has to be that this hymn was originally written in the high key and transposed by a somewhat careless publisher's assistant. The vocal ranges of the parts seem more natural in the high voice version. In particular, the opening phrase is scored for "tutti soprani" and is a little below their comfort zone in the lower key. This piece, as a separate anthem, has become incredibly popular. Innumerable recordings, from both sides of the Atlantic, can be found on You Tube, and I have not found a single instance where the low key version has been preferred, except as a sequel to a performance of the song by a low voice.

If the hymn was originally written for high voices, the song must have been too. The internal evidence is not quite so conclusive, but the pedal part of the high voice version descends several times below bottom E flat which, in transposition, would take it below the organ's normal range. In these passages, the pedal part has been shifted up an octave in the low voice version. This looks like a downwards transposition with the publisher's assistant doing the job properly this time. Of course, it may be that, in an upwards transposition, the pedal part was adjusted to take advantage of the lower notes now available. This is something that Stanford himself might have done, if he made or supervised the transposition. A publisher's assistant would be unlikely to bother. Altogether, summing the evidence of the song and the hymn, it looks as if the sixth song was conceived for high voice and was therefore not intended for Plunket Greene.



Where might a performance have taken place? The concert room does not usually have an organ available, though some Victorian town halls had one. Recitals are held in churches today, but were frowned upon in the early 20th century. Likewise, while the solo cantata or anthem was a regular presence during church services in baroque times, solo voices were not looked upon kindly in Stanford's day. If an anthem or service piece contained a solo part, it would be sung by a member of the choir, not by a professional soloist, with all their prima donna-isms and operatic grease paint. It looks as if Agnes Nicholls and Plunket Greene got round this at least once somewhere, but Stanford's Bible Songs remained unknown until quite recently, when recitals of religious music in churches became respectable and Stanford's op. 113 emerged as one of the few major original voice and organ works from the romantic period. Domestic performance can be virtually ruled out. A harmonium was a not infrequent feature in the parlours of the more pious Victorians, but would have been no more adequate than a piano. The elaborate organ part cannot be effectively realized without a full pedal board and two, preferably three, manuals.

By providing a hymn to follow each song, Stanford maybe hoped that the total package of song + hymn would pass through the lichgate as a respectable anthem, albeit with a prominent solo part. The upshot was that the hymns, particularly the sixth, became quite popular while the songs languished. The hymns have been likened to the chorales that close Bach's cantatas, and hence the description of the songs plus hymns as "mini-cantatas". The comparison is only partly apt, since Bach's closing chorales were intended for congregational performance. Even the simplest of these hymns, the first, has traps that would make it impractical to invite the public to join in.

The publication date for the hymns is usually given as 1910, though Knapp – another anomaly – states that “the hymn-anthems do not bear copyright dates”¹¹. My copy of no. 6, *Oh! for a closer walk*, has the copyright date of 1909, whereas nos. 1-4 have 1910. I cannot speak for no. 5, since I have the Cathedral Music reprint, which has replaced the original copyright notice with its own¹².

Since all six songs had been issued in high and low voice versions¹³, logical key sequences required high and low versions of the six hymns as well. Here, Hudson and Knapp, between them, reveal another strange discrepancy. Hudson states that they were published “in both ‘Low Key’ and High Key’ versions of each ... with the exception of no. 5 in ‘High Key’, for which no exemplar has been traced. The 5th Bible Song was issued in G minor and B flat minor and it is probable that no Chorale was published to follow the higher key version”¹⁴. He adds that Newcastle University Library has a “complete set of 11 Chorales”, which I take to mean all six in the lower key, 1-4 and 6 in the higher. The online catalogue of the Stanford Collection at Newcastle University confirms this¹⁵.

Knapp, however, reports a different situation, stating that Stainer & Bell “has no evidence in present files that a high-key plate ever existed” for 1 and 3¹⁶. Moreover, he continues, “Barnes¹⁷ reports that he has searched with collectors all over the United Kingdom for high key copies of (1) Let us with a gladsome mind and (3) In Thee is gladness and his searches have yielded no results. He has enquired with the archival librarian at Stainer & Bell and at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne and neither reliquary yielded the high key versions of hymn-anthems one and three”. In fact, Cathedral Music, now distributed by the Royal School of Church Music, publishes high key versions of Hymns 2, 4, 5 and 6 only. I am aware that Richard Barnes and Frederick Hudson, then a Professor of Newcastle University, corresponded closely in the attempt to assemble the fullest possible library of Stanford’s published works, but the lines must have crossed, since between them they would appear to have had a complete set of all six hymns in high key versions.

Dating the Bible Songs, beyond the assumption they were published soon after they were composed, can only be hypothetical. Stanford regularly dated his manuscripts, and more often than not the publisher reproduced the date at the end of the score. Unfortunately, there are no such dates on these published scores and the only manuscript to survive is a presumably later arrangement of no. 3 for voice, strings and organ, even this signed but not dated¹⁸. The only clues come from adjacent opus numbers – Stanford usually, though not invariably, kept his list of opus numbers in good order. The first of the Four Songs, op.112, is dated September 1908 (the other three are undated). The Choral Overture *Ave atque Vale*, op.114, is dated January 1909 in the published vocal score, but the MS full score is dated 31 December 1908¹⁹. If we suppose this work occupied Stanford for most of December, that would seem to leave time for him to write the Bible Songs, or enough of them to know they were to be a set of six and assign them an opus number, during

¹¹ Brady K. Knapp: *Charles Villiers Stanford’s Sacred Repertoire for Solo Voice, Choir and Organ: an analysis of Six Bible Songs and Hymns*, op.113, Doctoral Thesis submitted to Rice University, Houston, Texas, May 2003, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/a93f2775ed8f7638484d52dc7a3ffcd6/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=18750&diss=y>, retrieved 25.9.2023. Note on p.87.

¹² No. 5 was already out of print in 1972, the year in which I bought the other five hymns new from Stainer & Bell.

¹³ For whatever reason, Stanford’s key scheme was altered in the transposition. The original low voice versions of 1-3 are in C, D flat and D, each a semitone higher than the preceding one. The high versions of 1-3 are in E flat, F and F.

¹⁴ Hudson, *ibid*, B.15.

¹⁵ <https://specialcollections.ncl.ac.uk/cvs>, retrieved 25.9.2023.

¹⁶ Knapp, *ibid*. p. 88. Actually, he says nos. 1 and 2, but it is evident from the table and further comment that he means nos. 1 and 3. See also notes 12 and 13 on the same page.

¹⁷ Richard Barnes, founder of Cathedral Music and Chiltern Music and a major force in the restoration of Stanford’s music to the repertoire

¹⁸ Hudson, *ibid*, L.16.

¹⁹ Hudson, *ibid*, A.27.

October and November. Our perception of Stanford's almost perilously easy flow of inspiration leads us to imagine him waking up one morning, deciding to write a set of six *Bible Songs* and sitting down to do it. In the few cases where we actually know something about the gestation of his sets and cycles, as we do, for example, with the *Songs of Faith*²⁰, it proves more complicated. Often a single song would provide the germ from which the rest grew. Could we hypothesize an event in late 1908 at which Agnes Nicholls and Harry Plunket Greene were to present a song each, with organ accompaniment, as the seed from which the set grew?

I started by describing this as "the most frequently recorded of Stanford's works on a larger scale", but in reality, is it one work or six? Or twelve? The songs and hymns were originally published only separately. In more recent times, Cathedral Music has conveniently issued the songs in two alternative volumes, for high and low voice, and the hymns in a third volume. The evident presumption of Stanford, or his publishers, was that performers would dip into them, choosing one or two at will. The idea of performing opus numbers in their entirety was almost unknown in Stanford's day – sets of songs and short pieces were treated as source material from which the singer or player, in their wisdom, would make a suitable selection.

And yet ... In a [review in MWI](#) of one of the complete recordings, John France has written that "The key thing to understand about the Bible Songs and Hymns is that it is quite a revolutionary work ... both advanced and innovative. What Stanford has done is to fuse 'secular' and 'liturgical' formats in a single large-scale work. ... The overall effect of this work is to present the listener with a profound examination of the Christian Life". The effect of a good performance of all six songs with their hymns makes John France's description entirely plausible. In order to believe that Stanford actually meant this, however, we have to believe that he was doing two things at the same time: writing single pieces for contemporary consumption, and writing a single work, almost a mini-oratorio, for one or more solo voices plus choral comment as in Greek drama, for a future day when people would be ready to appreciate it. Whether or not he wanted to do this, he seems to have succeeded.

Seen as a single work, though, the *Bible Songs* were born with an inner rift. Since at least one was written for high voice (I believe two were), any performance by a single singer means that some will not be in their original key. This hardly matters if just the songs are performed – we take it as normal that art songs are transposed up and down to suit the singer – but it is problematic for the hymns. I noted above that the last hymn is a little below comfort zone in the low key version. No. 4, which in the low key requires the trebles to start from a bottom A, is even more so. Conversely, the other four hymns are unusually high when transposed up. This would be particularly true of 1 and 3 so, even if the high key copies were to be located and issued to complete the Cathedral Music series, it might prove impractical to use them. This has led to a number of varying decisions by those who have performed the work. These are better illustrated by a discussion of the recordings. Before doing this, it is necessary to mention some editions published in the 1970s that also seem to have cast their shadow on present-day performances²¹.

Editions in the 1970s

With the laudable idea of rescuing some fine music from oblivion, in 1976-7, the Royal School of Church Music issued *Four Short Anthems by Stanford*, edited by Lionel Dakers. These were hymns 2, 3, 4 and 6. A notable feature of 2, 3 and 4 (and also 1 and 5) is that the choir enter immediately, without any introduction from the organ. This is fine when the song has just been sung. For a separate performance, the choir need to get their notes from somewhere so, rather than have the organist just plonk a chord, Dakers provided brief organ introductions. In a later US edition of *Four Short Anthems*, by GIA Publications of Chicago, Illinois,

²⁰ See [my article in this series](#).

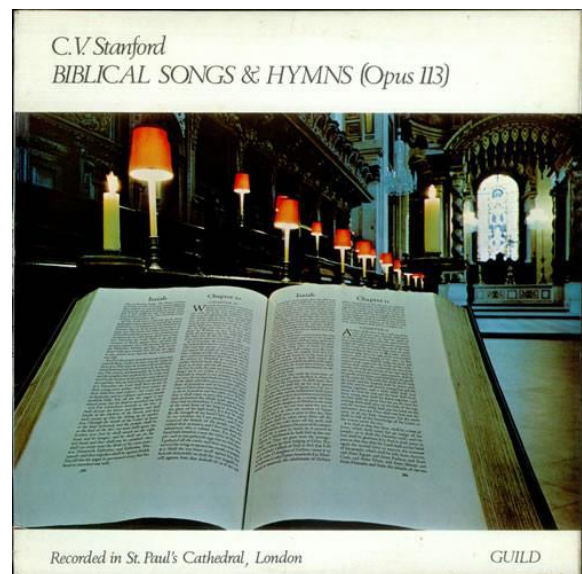
²¹ For the following information on the 1970s editions, I am indebted to Knapp, *ibid*, pp. 88-91.

Dakers' name was omitted, so many choir masters are unaware that these introductions were not Stanford's own. Useful as they are for a separate performance, they are unwelcome intrusions after the song. Additionally, the Dakers edition transposed the second Hymn from D flat to D.

In 1978, the RSCM, through the Addington Press, issued *Four Bible Songs for Solo or Unison Voices with Organ Accompaniment*. This was evidently intended as a companion to *Four Short Anthems*, since the songs were again nos. 2, 3, 4 and 6, though not in that order, and no. 2 was transposed into D to match the anthem. The Preface explains that "Although Stanford wrote the *Bible Songs* for solo voice and organ accompaniment, they can be just as effective when sung by groups of equal voices". Not everyone reads prefaces so, even if one agrees that they are equally effective sung by unison voices, the title page seems to have planted in many people's minds the idea that Stanford himself approved this option. The rationale behind the publication was no doubt that, since solo songs are not normally sung in church, this was the only way to rescue the music. A rationale that does not stand up today. However, it is time to discuss the effectiveness or not of the various solutions in terms of the actual recordings.

Commercial recordings

The first recording, including the hymns, issued in 1977²², set something of a gold standard. The singer was the baritone Maurice Bevan, familiar on record as a member of the Deller Consort as well as Choral Vicar of St. Paul's Cathedral from 1949 to 1989. It was recorded in St. Paul's Cathedral and, while the choir was named as the "Barry Rose Singers", no one doubted that they were drawn from St. Paul's Cathedral Choir, of which Rose was then Master. John Dexter was the organist for the hymns, while Rose himself accompanied the songs. Bevan's warm baritone, steady and even, seems to come from the heart of the Anglican cathedral tradition and there is a timeless grandeur to this performance. Moreover, it elicited a valuable testimony from Stanley Webb in his review for *Gramophone*:



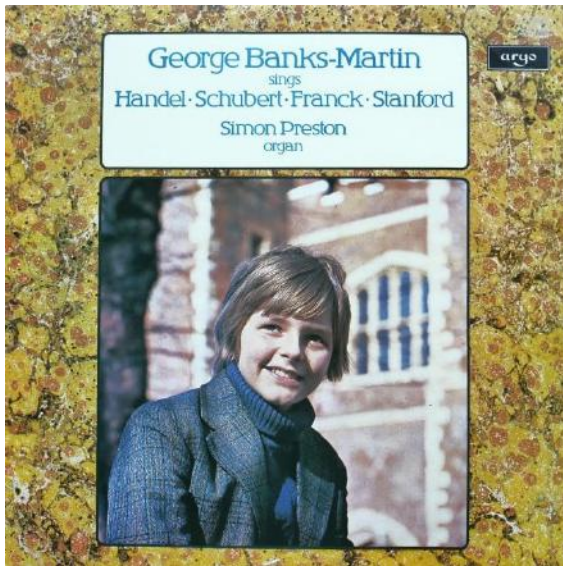
Being old enough to have heard Plunket Greene once or twice in his last years, I feel that Maurice Bevan in no way falls short of his declamatory style. Yet ... he is conscious that he is singing sacred music in church and enriches his sensitive interpretation by his awareness of its mystical power²³.

Low keys are of course used and this illustrates, at one point, the rift within the work. For hymns 1, 2, 3 and 5 there is no problem since this is the original key and it fits the SATB vocal ranges perfectly. Songs 4 and – as I believe – 6 were originally written for high voice so the transposed editions of the hymns are used. The trebles handle their descent to a low B in no. 6 with no apparent difficulty, but no. 4, with its several low As, is more of a problem. The parts are here redistributed for ATBB. It goes well, but this hymn acquires a more sombre tone than the rest and it proves more effective in other recordings that use the original high key. This is a problem inherent in the work itself. A performance of all six songs by low voice with the hymns will either have to countenance singing the fourth hymn in a higher key than the preceding song, or accept that this hymn will be less effective than the others. That said, the recording is a classic. It is difficult to speak of

²² Guild GRS 7009

²³ Gramophone, July 1977

“tradition” with music that had remained virtually unsung for more than half a century, but this performance does seem to speak to us from Stanford’s own day.



Amazingly, another recording appeared that same year. It could not have been more different. Only the songs were given and the singer was a boy treble, George Banks-Martin. It was set down in Keble College, Oxford, and Simon Preston was the organist²⁴. My initial reaction at the time was one of disappointment, while recognizing that the singer was highly musical and had a lovely voice. It is true that a young singer will not give us the mystic power, the sense of human frailty, the feeling of faith achieved through tribulations, that an adult singer such as Bevan can bring. But 45 years later, I find there are compensations. Using the high keys, with swifter tempi and marvellous playing from Preston, he brings a youthful enthusiasm combined with a serene beauty that some might even prefer.

At the same time, this recording marks a stage in the transformation of Stanford and a beginning of the appreciation of his music for something that it is not. After all, he wrote the songs for two professional singers with international careers and variegated experience of life, and surely expected all this to come out in their interpretations. Ergo, Bevan’s recording is something like what he wanted, Banks-Martin’s is not. Yet is not all musical interpretation a matter of transforming the music, even while not changing the notes, from what it was originally into something that has a meaning for the interpreter and his or her contemporary audience? Usually, this is not done consciously, but even those who most preach against such “distortions” are often more guilty of them than they realize. If the music is strong enough to communicate a message in its “new” form, it will live. As we shall see, the transformation of the Bible Songs into something they are not, while respecting the written notes, has gone a lot further since 1977.

The first CD recording came in 1990. The Chichester Cathedral Choir was directed by Alan Thurlow and the organist was Jeremy Suter²⁵. It included both the songs and the hymns, and claims virtue in having the songs sung, not by a solo voice but by unison treble voices. Alan Thurlow’s booklet note states:

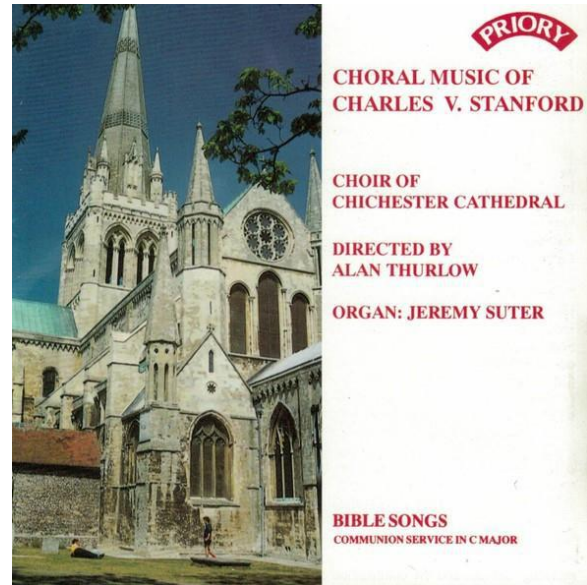
While never conceived in this way, there can be no doubt of their suitability for this treatment and, at times, the combination of pitch, purity of tone, and the strength of the combined treble voices seems to complement the complexity and scale of the writing in the organ part.

At least Thurlow does not hide the fact that Stanford did not have unison voice treatment in mind, but the argument never convinced me. Already, the use of a single treble voice cushioned the music from the deeper experiences of the adult world, but it did not remove the fundamental aspect that the songs are an individual’s response that is contrasted with the choral comment of the hymns. The upshot is that, while a single song plus hymn might work as an anthem during a service, all six in a row risk making this beautiful music sound monotonous. This is not to deny that the boys sing very nicely, but it is too much of a muchness.

²⁴ Argo ZK 11

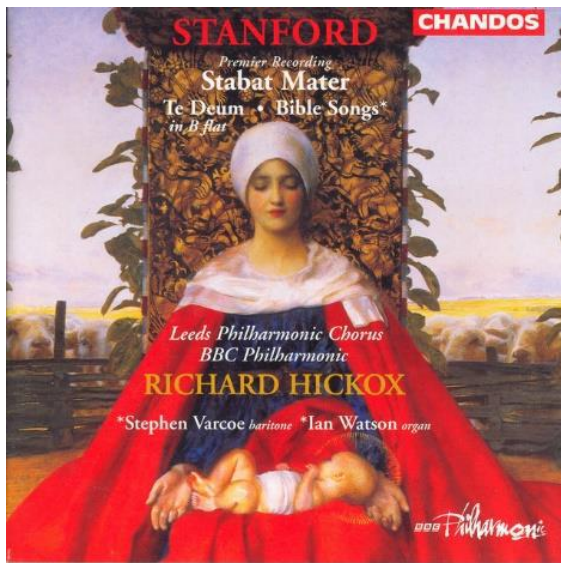
²⁵ Priory PRCD 312

There are also, it must be said, some odd decisions along the way. The first song is sung in the low key, which seems strange for trebles, though it eases the way for a solid performance of the hymn without the need for upward transposition. The second song and hymn are then sung in the high key. This produces a rather high tessitura for the hymn, but the trebles manage their top B flat very well. The third song is again in the high key, but here the problems begin, because the hymn is sung in the low key using the Dakers introduction. There might be an excuse for using this latter given that the hymn is not sung in the same key as the preceding song, but then the fourth song and hymn are both sung in the high key with the Dakers introduction an unnecessary and unwelcome interpolation. The fifth song and hymn are sung in the low key, the sixth in the high key. It would be interesting to know the reasoning behind this.



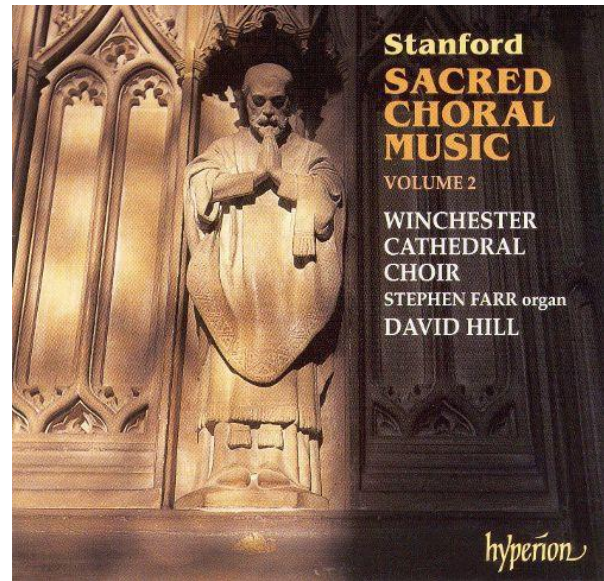
The baritone Stephen Varcoe set down just the songs in 1996, as part of a CD that contained the première recording of the *Stabat Mater*²⁶. I have to say that I have a problem with the sort of vibrato used by Varcoe, which to my ears resembles unsteady bleating at the best of times, and something worse than that when he puts pressure on it. It is well that he does not attempt the optional high G in *A Song of Wisdom*, since the E

he sings is far from pleasant as it is. Under the circumstances, it may be a relief that at “my river became a sea” he adjusts the music to sing a C sharp instead of an E, but the alteration of Stanford’s vocal line has to be regretted in principle. I tried to “hear through” this in the hope of finding some beauty or character in the musical interpretation, but all I could hear, from both singer and organist, was a streamlined run-through with faster tempi than most adopted elsewhere and no compensating urgency. *A Song of Battle* is exciting at this pace, but as Stanford swings into the major key at “Our soul is escaped even as a bird from the snare of the fowlers”, every other performance finds a sense of joyful liberation while Varcoe just gallops ahead. Stanford’s harmonies and flowing texture will speak for themselves if given just that extra moment of space.



²⁶ Chandos Chan 9548

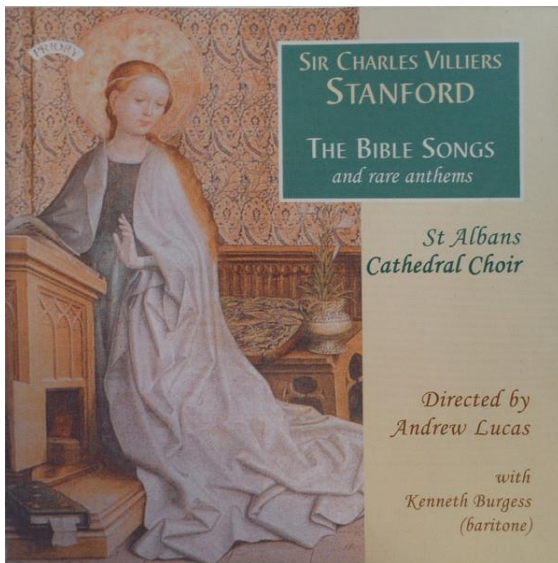
Op. 113, with the hymns, next appeared on a three-CD survey of Stanford's church music in which the Winchester Cathedral Choir was conducted by David Hill²⁷. The Bible Songs were set down in 1997. Hill chose the low keys for nos. 1, 2, 3 and 5, though using the RSCM/Addington D major transposition of no. 2 in place of Stanford's original D flat. Nos. 4 and 6 are sung in the high keys by a boy treble, Kenan Burrows. Having chosen the low keys for the 1, 2, 3 and 5, Hill made the curious decision to have them sung by a tenor, William Kendall. He has the hymns sung in the matching keys – so no. 2 is in D as in the RSCM/Dakers edition – but inexplicably uses the inauthentic Dakers organ introductions to nos. 2, 3 and 4. This is particularly regrettable in no. 2 where, as the Bevan/Rose recording shows, the effect of the choir wafting in with "Purest and Highest" immediately after the end of the song can be magical.



In spite of these unwelcome intrusions, Hill nevertheless presents a consistent and carefully thought-through vision of the work as a whole. I was initially nonplussed by the choice of a tenor to sing at baritone pitch, but this means that Kendall, well within his comfort zone, is able to give an intimate, confessional and inwardly felt performance. Likewise the treble is not encouraged to "sing out", as Banks-Martin did, but maintains a gentle, calm composure. In the hymns, too, Hill maintains a generally restrained tone²⁸, reserving the full power of choir and organ – which he plays himself in the songs – for moments of rare splendour. Only the exciting *Song of Battle* breaks this mood of gentle devotion. Since, in 1, 2, 3 and 5, Stanford wrote these notes for a baritone, who would by his nature be required to sing out more strongly, and since he wrote 4 (and probably 6) for a soprano whose roles embraced Sieglinde and Brunnhilde, it would seem evident that he did not intend anything like this. We are witnessing, therefore, another stage in the appropriation of Stanford and the appreciation of him for something he was not. Hill has nevertheless reinterpreted the music in a way that surely has meaning for him and will doubtless be found moving by many, myself included.

²⁷ Sir Charles Villiers Stanford: Sacred Choral Music – 2, Hyperion CDA 66965. The three CDs were subsequently reissued as a boxed set (CDS44311/13)

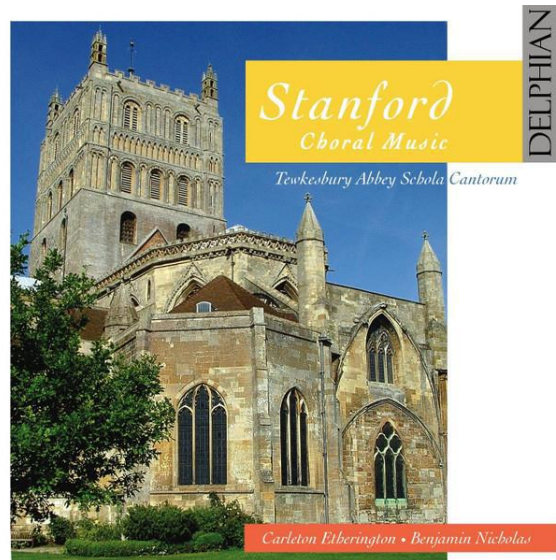
²⁸ Hill's very tender performance of *Pray that Jerusalem* brought to my attention a detail I had not noticed before. The last phrase of the hymn is identical in notes to a phrase that dominates *Homeward Bound*, the fourth of the *Songs of the Sea*, particularly in its final bars where the land, seen at last after long voyaging, is described as the home "of all our mortal dream". In 1997 I wrote an article, available on MWI, called "[Stanford and Musical Quotation](#)". I discussed there Stanford's not infrequent use of musical quotations to make his points. Have I found another one? It would certainly be attractive to work up a theory where Jerusalem, for whose peace we are asked to pray and whose good we "will seek always", is equated with the home "of all our mortal dream", but the doubt will remain that the resemblance is simply accidental.



The recording made by St. Albans Cathedral Choir under Andrew Lucas in 1999-2000²⁹ apparently marks a return to the Bevan/Rose model. A baritone, Kenneth Burgess, sings all six songs, so low keys are used for all the hymns. Lucas, like Rose, has the fourth hymn sung by ATBB and here, too, it is well sung but less vibrant than the other hymns. In reality, the performance is not a rerun of the earlier one, since Burgess has a younger, lighter voice. Tempi are generally faster, creating not urgency but a gentle mellifluousness. In the first two songs, I felt the deeper emotions were being passed over, but Burgess responds to the troubled interrogations that open *A Song of Hope* (“Out of the deep have I called”), *A Song of Battle* is exciting and he responds to the rising emotion of the last song. The hymns, too, are not allowed to languish. In

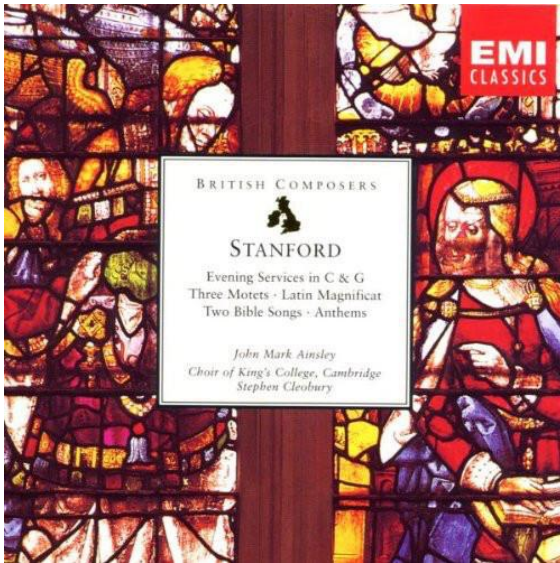
particular, the third, *In Thee is gladness*, taken slowly and reverently in some performances, goes at a pace that recalls its dance origin, and seems to work equally well either way.

The version by the Tewkesbury Abbey Schola Cantorum of Dean Close Preparatory School, conducted by Benjamin Nicholas, was set down in 2009-10³⁰. Here the mini-oratorio aspect is emphasized by using three singers. Songs 1 and 3 are sung in the low keys by the bass Christopher Borrett, the others use the high keys. 2 and 5 are sung by the tenor Nicholas Scott, the boy treble Laurence Kilsby sings 4 and 6. The hymns are sung in the same keys as the songs, without the Dakers introductions, so this is the only performance I have heard of the fifth Hymn, *Praise to the Lord*, in the high key. The tessitura is rather high, but they manage it with no apparent difficulty. It is also the only recording I know of the fourth hymn, *Pray that Jerusalem*, that uses the high key without the unwelcome Dakers introduction. Unlike the St. Albans recording, the tendency here is towards slow tempi – *In Thee is gladness* is given very tenderly – but it shares with that performance a preference for gentle mellifluousness rather than deep emotion – perhaps inevitably given the presence of three young voices. It seems to me that we are further than ever from what Stanford had in mind, but this music shows a remarkably ability to adapt to a wide range of interpretations while retaining its capacity to move.



²⁹ Priory PRCD 733

³⁰ Delphian DCD 34087



I would not attempt to catalogue all the recordings of single Songs and Hymns, but a 1996 Stanford recital by the King's College Choir, Cambridge³¹ under Stephen Cleobury adds a certain dimension in that it contains songs 4 and 6 – *A Song of Peace* and *A Song of Wisdom* – sung by a tenor, John Mark Ainsley, followed by their respective Hymns. Though these are the two high voice songs, this is the first time I have heard them from a tenor. I am afraid I find Ainsley's vibrato excessive, though his voice is sweet and easy of production. Sweet and easy is perhaps the best description of the interpretations, which seem disconcertingly uninvolved, an impression reinforced by the gentle charm of the finely honed choral singing. *Pray that Jerusalem*, moreover, is disfigured by the spurious Dakers introduction.

Before leaving the commercial recordings, I should mention one that I have been unable to hear. In 2008, the Choir of Ripon Cathedral conducted by Andrew Bryden gave all six hymns, without the songs, in a recital dedicated to hymn arrangements³². MWI reviewer Johan van Veen [commented unenthusiastically](#). I would gladly compare my own reaction, but this disc seems to have vanished without trace.

You Tube

It may not be entirely fair to apply to You Tube recordings the same standard we apply to commercial ones. In many cases, they aim no higher than sharing with friends and family an event that was moving for those present. On the other hand, the performance is there for all to hear, so I shall offer a cautious survey of what You Tube has to offer. I shall not try to be inclusive, since I am principally interested in performances that show a perspective not offered by the commercial recordings. I am also interested in the extent to which these songs have spread beyond the UK and even beyond the English-speaking world.

The sheer fact that a performance (of the songs only) took place on 8 October 2016 in St. Stanislav Catholic Church, St. Petersburg, Russia, is notable enough in itself. The singer was the mezzo-soprano Darya Rositskaya, the organist was Mikhail Mishchenko. This is also the first time in this survey that the songs have been sung by a mezzo-soprano. Low keys are of course used. The event was supported by the Herbert Howells Trust.

If Russian mezzo-sopranos are synonymous for you with a whopping voice and massive vibrato, this is only half true here. Rositskaya certainly has a strong voice, but it is steady and free of excessive vibrato. I am a little concerned that she seems to need to take a lot of breaths, though she manages to insert them without upsetting the sense of the words. A lot of the time, her English is very good, so it is all the more disturbing when something goes awry. Surely somebody in Russia's second largest city could have told her that "abyss" does not rhyme with "advice" and that if you pronounce "vein" and "word" as "vine" and "ward", you give the text a different meaning. The music is treated with considerable freedom, some of which seems to derive from the organist, who has a seemingly limited instrument at his disposition. The often abrupt changes of gear are consistent with how Russians tend to perform their own music, and the really interesting thing here is that, whereas Anglican performances tend to the intimate and devotional, Stanford is treated here as a full size composer in post-romantic, almost Mahlerian vein. Rositskaya certainly sings with whole-hearted

³¹ EMI CDC 5 55535 2

³² REGENT REGCD 298.

conviction and I am sure this performance had considerable impact. Whatever its occasional oddities, Stanfordinians should listen to it and ponder on the composer they hear.

The other two complete performances are from the USA. The performance by the Cathedral Choir and Cathedral Choral Scholars of the Cathedral of St. John the Evangelist, Spokane (Washington), given on 25 April 2021, also included the hymns. The organist was John Bodinger. The interesting feature here is the use of six soloists. This emphasizes the mini-oratorio aspect of the work and was doubtless a fine showcase for six chosen members of the Cathedral choir school. The risk is that of suggesting an end-of-term concert, and as with most end-of-term concerts, there is a divergence of styles and aims, with some powerful voices and some nicely-trained but weak ones. There is also a variance from no vibrato at all to a very heavy vibrato indeed. I will not name them all, but the two contraltos, especially Amanda Glover, might have a good future in store, perhaps more in the field of early music.

There are also some oddities to be noted. In three of the Songs, the melodic line is altered at least once. I was not sure if these were misreadings that went uncorrected at rehearsal or whether they thought they were correcting Stanford's own mistakes. No other performers have felt this necessary. Then the first song, sung in the high key, is followed by the hymn in the low key and the second song, in the original D flat, is followed by the D major version of the hymn with the Dakers introduction. The hymns after the third and fifth songs are replaced by simple four-part a cappella settings of the same hymns. OK, I suppose, if you prefer these settings, but the programme booklet does not mention anywhere that they are not Stanford's work, and this is surely wrong. 4 and 6 use high keys throughout, the fourth Hymn with the Dakers introduction. Rather a lot of niggles, but I am sure the sum of the performance was moving for those present.

Also in 2021, on 20 March at the Emmanuel Episcopal Church, Baltimore, Maryland, American soprano Colleen Daly gave the six songs with the organist Christian Lane. Although we know that the fourth song, and perhaps the sixth, were written for a soprano with a big career in opera as well as oratorio and vocal recitals, all the performances I have discussed so far of the high key versions have been sung by a boy treble. Unlike Agnes Nicholls, Colleen Daly has not essayed Brunnhilde or Sieglinde, but she has sung Violetta, Musetta, Micaëla, Donna Anna and Countess Almaviva. She is therefore within reach of letting us hear what Agnes Nicholls might have sounded like in this music. Those used to the Anglican sound may note some slightly American vowels, but anyone who objects on these grounds probably does not wish the music to travel. These rather more open vowels, moreover, may contribute to the excitingly forward sound – but still warm and full – that Daly makes.

Not to hold back any longer, this was one of the encounters that makes life worth living. It is not often that, when returning a work you have known for some fifty years, you can recapture the thrill of the first hearing. Here, the tingle factor was frequent. Daly and Stanford, as Bevan and Stanford so many years ago, and aided by a splendid organ and organist, rekindled my youthful enthusiasm. And yet it is all very different. Bevan and Rose concentrated on the mystical power of the songs and their performance seemed rooted in long years of tradition. Daly and Lane bring an evangelical zeal, an eager desire to get the message across. Bevan and Rose tell us where the music came from. Daly and Lane suggest where it may be going. I only regret that the hymns were not included.

I could stop here, but You Tube also provides a number of individual performances that add interesting perspectives.

What must be the early surviving recording of any part of this work comes from the Choir of St. Nicholas College, Chislehurst under Sidney Nicholson, in a live broadcast from 29 January 1939. They give a heartfelt performance of the final hymn, *Oh! for a closer walk*, in a fairly broad tempo.

Historical, too, in a melancholy sort of way, was the final evensong held, on 13 July 1985, by the Choristers of the Choral Foundation of St. Michael's, Tenbury before the closure of the school. Stanford figured largely, with the G major Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis as well as the last of the Bible Songs, *A Song of Wisdom*, sung by the unison trebles and followed by its hymn. Slowish, valedictory tempi, dwelling lovingly on the hymn in particular, probably reflect what everybody was thinking at the time.

Still in the UK, twenty-one-year old soprano Elisabeth Cullen presented the two high voice songs, *A Song of Peace* and *A Song of Wisdom*, at the Church of St. Thomas-on-the-Bourne, Farnham, Surrey, on 5 November 2021. The organist was Ellie Carter. Cullen has a very pure, clear voice and I think that, blindfolded, I would have been undecided whether this was a boy or a girl treble. This is the mellifluous, gently-flowing Stanford, beautiful in its way, that seems to be preferred in the UK now.

And not only in the UK. The You Tube is rather full of girls who look to be still in their teens singing one or other of these songs with sweet, demure voices. I will not try to catalogue them all, since I have an innate resistance to You Tube videos that accompany the singer's name and the title of the piece with an amateur video of an unidentified church that might be on either side of the Atlantic, on an undisclosed date. I am sure their performances gave pleasure to those present. I will put in a special mention for Jordyn Tatum who, on 16 March 2020 in the Episcopal Cathedral of Albuquerque, New Mexico, accompanied by Edmund Connolly, sang *A Song of Freedom*. The tempo is incredibly slow. I doubt if the score marking of 104 to the fourth note is viable, but this goes at about 69, broadening to around 63 at the end of each verse. But her voice is pure, steady, even and remarkably well controlled – only in one phrase did she almost not make it to the end, not surprisingly at this tempo. Her words are also very clear. The song conveys a gentle message of comfort. "These musical pieces ease my heart", one commentator has written. I leave suspended for the moment the question of whether this is what Stanford actually wanted to do. It is also a sobering thought that, whether these can develop into more than locally appreciated voices depends about fifty per cent on the singers' own gifts, which seem undeniable, and fifty per cent on the teachers they find – there are as many bad as there are good.

A similar type of light soprano voice, though in a more mature stage of development, and a similar interpretative slant, is offered by the Canadian Jennifer McCallum, who sang *A Song of Freedom*, *A Song of Peace* and *A Song of Wisdom* in St. Thomas's Anglican Church, Huron Street, Toronto on an unspecified date but posted on You Tube on 13 June 2021. The organist was Matthew Whitfield. McCallum is clearer with the words than Cullen and sometimes attempts a little more drama, as in "And He shall smite the earth" in *A Song of Peace* and the last page of *A Song of Wisdom*, but at the risk of putting too much pressure on her voice. Her *Song of Freedom* is almost as slow as Tatum's, yet this is the performance of the three that I would most likely return to, since McCallum justifies her tempo with a good line and it comes across as a genuine alternative, her fuller voice compared with Tatum's adding a suggestion of confidence.

Having said that the metronome mark in the score of *A Song of Freedom* is scarcely viable, I now find that the American bass-baritone Thomas Dawkins has come pretty close to it. Dawkins describes himself on his website as a "musician at large", appearing as singer, pianist, organist, choir conductor and also playing a number of orchestral instruments. His You Tube channel contains a great many rarities, particularly from the Anglican repertoire, with vocal solos, organ pieces and choral items. Apparently he sings, plays and conducts them all himself, though the presence of a choir, for which he could hardly provide all the voices himself, suggests there may be some anonymous collaborators after all. Venues and locations are not named, but he has been Choir Conductor and organist at the Congregational Church of Harvard since 2008, so I imagine the recordings were made there. There are no dates beyond those of the You Tube posting. These suggest that his Stanford items were all made during the last year or so. He has recorded all the *Bible Songs* except *A Song*

of Battle and, with his choir, he has recorded the last hymn, *Oh! For a closer walk with God*. He has a warm timbre, even and rounded. His tempi are unusually fast in all the songs, disconcertingly so at the beginning of *A Song of Hope*, yet he does not sound pressed, finding, rather, musical logic and a generous flow. He is careful over the words and comes across as a comforting, assuaging presence. Hidden depths are passed over but there is a pleasingly homespun air that has its own validity. He makes a few odd decisions over transpositions. He sings *A Song of Freedom* up a semitone from the published low key of C, but it lies well within his voice like that. *A Song of Trust*, *A Song of Hope* and *A Song of Wisdom* are sung in the published low keys, but *A Song of Peace* is sung in B flat. Here, perhaps, the published A would have been better, since the final F in this piece is the one less than pleasant sound throughout. This is somewhat strange, since the optional G in *A Song of Wisdom* is well handled. The hymn, *Oh! for a closer walk*, is sung in D flat, which is disconcerting after the song in C, but perhaps Dawkins did not intend them to be heard in sequence. At the beginning of this piece, the opening lines of the hymn are not sung by sopranos, as Stanford indicated, but are treated as a baritone solo, taken by Dawkins, obviously. If the hymn is intended as a comment on the song, it is hardly convincing to have it initially sung by the same voice, but taken in isolation the result is attractive.

Returning to Europe, a more viscerally involving experience is provided by the Ukrainian mezzo-soprano Anastasiia Staroselska who, with the organist Peter Van der Velde, sang *A Song of Hope* in the Cathedral of Our Lady, Antwerp. No date, but posted on You Tube on 25 March 2023. Like the Russian Rositskaya, she has a powerful mezzo voice free of the wobble we used to associate with Slavonic singers. She treats Stanford as a composer on the grandest scale, beginning very slowly and gradually ratcheting up the tension. Though this is another personalized interpretation, her gear changes are more smoothly handled than Rositskaya's – maybe Van der Velde helped here – and I prefer the result. She makes no overt pronunciation errors, but some of her vowels are strange and a little work with a language coach would do no harm. All the same, I look forward to future instalments – Staroselska and Van der Velde tour regularly as a duo and, by the time this article has appeared, they will have performed three of the songs in Vienna.

I have passed over most of the separate performances of these songs by unison trebles/sopranos, but my interest in the geographical spread of Stanford persuaded me to listen to two choirs from the Netherlands.

The Roden Girl Choristers, under their director Sonja de Vries, have taken the British choir schools as their model. They apparently tour quite a bit, or did – none of their You Tube performances are very recent – and have sung, on separate occasions and in different venues, *A Song of Trust*, *A Song of Peace* and *A Song of Wisdom*. Considerably the most interesting is the first of these, given in the Propsteikirche Sankt Peter, Recklinghausen, Germany on 17 December 2016, with their regular organist Sietze de Vries. They sing this, not in the high voice key, but in the doctored low key of D in the RSCM publication. This results in full-toned, unforced singing. Helped by a generous acoustic and a fine organ, this is a rare occasion where the “mystic power” of the Bevan recording comes across in a performance with unison voices. A rare case of a version by unison voices to which I expect to return from time to time.

I found the other two songs less impressive. I was left wondering whether a lower key might have suited the girls better, maybe just by a semitone. The high B flat in *A Song of Wisdom*, where the choir combines with that of the Koorschool van Ars Musica in the Adventskerk of Alphen aan den Rijn in the Netherlands, would have been better avoided.

Lastly, the Kampen Boys' Choir, conducted by Rintje te Wies with the organist Sander van den Houten, presented *A Song of Peace* with the following hymn *Pray that Jerusalem* on 8 February 2020 in the Bovenkerk of Kampen, Overijssel, the Netherlands. A rather four-square rendering.

Some final thoughts

Stanford's *Bible Songs*, therefore, have been recorded, singly or complete, in performances of mystic power (Bevan), youthful ardour (Banks-Dutton), intimacy and devotion (Hill), evangelical zeal (Daly), comforting reassurance (Dawkins), ethereal balm (Tatum) and visceral engagement (Starolselska), with apologies to those not mentioned. The amazing thing is that the music seems able to take all these different interpretations. But surely Stanford must have had only one of them in mind – or something else again – as he wrote them? Is there any way we can discover which he actually intended (if it matters)?

One answer might be to examine the art of the two singers for whom he wrote it.

In the case of Harry Plunket Greene, the recorded evidence is not very helpful. The weird and wonderful late recording of Schubert's *Der Leiermann* has been widely commented. Apart from this, we have little but Irish songs of a relatively light nature. The fact that he could elevate *Molly Brannigan* to high art as no one else could³³ does not provide us much of a clue as to how he would have sung these songs, beyond that he would have taken great care over the words. More of a clue comes from Stanley Webb's reference to his "declamatory style" and his testimony that Bevan came within measurable distance of it.

Agnes Nicholls recorded rather more though, significantly, her voice was so powerful that the early equipment often buckled under the strain and many of her attempts could not be issued. Much of what reached the public consisted of popular ballads of the day, but her recording (in Italian) of Puccini's *Vissi d'arte* and the *Starlight Express* excerpts under Elgar himself are closer to the mark. Modern ears will immediately notice the total absence of vibrato, creating the somewhat blanched timbre also characteristic of many Italian sopranos of the early 20th century – her Puccini can match the best of them. The Elgar testifies to her power and to her ability to express emotion with long, arching phrases. Boy trebles and teenage girls, and their teachers, might conclude that, if this is the voice Stanford expected, they themselves have no more business here than in *Tosca* or in *Isolde's Liebestod*. This is not to deny the balm that comes to the soul of many listeners when they hear a boy treble sing these songs, but it is arguable they are appreciating Stanford for something he did not intend to do.

Another clue might come from the relationship of this cycle with the slightly earlier *Songs of Faith*. I have already referred to my article on these songs and I examine there the nature of the faith that Stanford seems to be expressing. Briefly, the cycle begins with three songs to poems by Tennyson in which "honest doubt" is countered, at best, by a mystical hope that in the end there may be "something higher". These are followed by three songs to texts by Whitman which express an unorthodox faith to say the least and one of which, *Tears*, seems more about fear than faith.

In setting six songs with texts straightforwardly drawn from the Bible and the Apocrypha, Stanford seemingly offers assurance that, whatever the *Songs of Faith* might suggest, his own faith was sound. In a performance like that under Hill, this is the message we receive. When we turn to Bevan with his "mystic power", the link with *Songs of Faith* becomes closer. For mysticism tends to be the hopeful solution we turn to when we are not quite sure. Even some of Stanford's titles raise questions. He called the second song "A Song of Trust" – but his immediate trust is a mystic one: "I will lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help"³⁴. The third song which, after its initial interrogations, concludes "I look for the Lord; my soul doth wait

³³ See my article in this series about [Molly Brannigan](#).

³⁴ I am well aware that all more recent translations of the Bible, starting from the Revised Standard Version, punctuate this "I will lift up mine eyes to the hills. From whence cometh my help? My help cometh from the Lord". We should not, according to this punctuation, look to the hills for our help. This seems far more logical, but the Bible Stanford knew was the King James plus the Coverdale translations of the Psalms, and in those days Bishops preached sermons about

for Him”, might have been called “A Song of Faith” or even “A Song of Certainty” but is called, instead, “A Song of Hope”. Hope and certainty are not always the same thing. Maybe I am making too much of this, but we might at least allow the possibility that Stanford’s inner life, which he kept strictly to himself, was more troubled than it appeared on the surface. Certainly, an interpretation that gives due space to the mystical element in these songs will find parallels, rather than an inexplicable variance, between *Songs of Faith* and the *Bible Songs*, which were, after all, written only about two years apart.

A final point regards the division between two singers. I said at the beginning that this created a rift in the work, but as this article developed I became convinced that this is so only if we have the songs all sung by one singer and wish to include the hymns as well. As we have seen in two cases, if the single voice is a low one, there is the minor inconvenience that the fourth hymn needs to be adjusted for ATBB. If the single voice is a high one, it is more complicated, since high versions of hymns 1 and 3 are not available, though in these days of electronic wizardry they could be easily made. They would probably need to be rearranged for SSAT. So far, no soprano or tenor solo singer has recorded the cycle with the hymns³⁵. But if the original scheme is adopted, with a low voice for songs 1-3 and 5 and a high voice for 4 and 6, the problem is resolved. There is another good reason for doing this. Songs 1-3 and 5 are personal responses, interrogations, meditations and prayers. Song 4 is Isaiah’s prophecy of the coming of Christ and song 6, *A Song of Wisdom*, is a promise by God, given extra force by the optional high note at “Come unto me, ye that are desirous of me, and be ye filled with my fruits”. It therefore makes perfect sense to have these two songs sung by a different voice and this, combined with the choral comments, would heighten the impression that this is a short oratorio, based on reflections rather than narrative. Most of Stanford’s contemporaries would not have recognized this as an oratorio, but Hindemith or Stravinsky, whatever they thought of the musical idiom, would have done so. Which brings us back to John France’s claim that it is “quite a revolutionary work ... both advanced and innovative.” Though as I hinted at the beginning, whether Stanford actually looked ahead to the day when it would be performed this way is something we can only speculate on. Of the performances discussed, that by Hill and the Tewkesbury performance separate songs 4 and 6 by having a treble sing them while a male voice or voices sing the rest, though I am not convinced that a treble voice has the dramatic force to represent the voices of Isaiah and of God Himself. So I have to make the uncomfortable conclusion that, though this work has been presented in numerous ways, and makes a powerful effect in all of them, the one thing not tried is the scheme Stanford himself seems to have wished. This could be reconstructed by putting together Bevan in 1-3 and 5, with the hymns, and Daly in 4 and 6, using the Tewkesbury performance of hymn 4 (the only high voice performance without the Dakers introduction) and a wide open choice of high voice performances for the final hymn. But the divergence of sources would no doubt prove unsatisfactory.

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our help coming from the hills and people thought it an admirable poetic image. Even today, there are those who stand by the King James Bible and find comfort in this mystic promise.

³⁵ A concert performance of the complete cycle including hymns was given on 30 June 2018 in St. Mark’s Church, Broomhill, Sheffield by the tenor Stewart Campbell and the Sheffield Chorale, but in the absence of a recording I clearly have no idea about the keys used.

<https://www.thestanfordsociety.org/2018/06/27/a-very-british-rivalry/>, retrieved 15.10.2023

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