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

27. A Recitation that was and a Ballet that wasn't

No matter what form of music you think of, Stanford's copious output usually contains at least one example. Two genres are lacking: recitation and ballet.

The former gap has now been filled. *Lay his Sword by his Side*, a setting of Moore's poem for reciter and orchestra, was sitting in the Royal College of Music library all the time and a scanned version of the original manuscript can now be downloaded from the Internet Archive. If this is hard to decipher, the English Heritage Music Series[1], under the editorship of Matthew W. Mehaffey, has computer-set it. The full score and parts are available for download.

I am not about to announce the discovery of an unknown ballet score, but I have come across evidence that one was contemplated and even partially written.

Lay his Sword by His Side

What seems to be Stanford's only work for reciter and orchestra is signed and dated at the end of the score March 16 1915. At the foot of the first page is a note: "(Return to C. V. Stanford, 50 Holland St, Kensington, W (Performance right in theatres required except for charity performances for the war.) C.V.S." It has no opus number.

The poem is one of "Moore's Melodies". The orchestral part uses the Irish tune, originally called "If the sea were ink", with which Moore associated it. Stanford had already made a voice and piano arrangement for "Moore's Melodies Restored" op. 60 (1895) and used it again as an epilogue to the sombre Second Irish Rhapsody op. 84 (1903). The poem is a funeral oration for a dead chieftain and in all three settings Stanford sets up a funeral march rhythm with a two-note phrase on beats two and three that may be embryonic to the "Fare Well" motif from "Songs of the Fleet" op. 117 (1910). Although all three versions begin similarly, they diverge sufficiently to assume an independent existence. In the Rhapsody, the tragic mood is maintained to the end. The poem, however, ends with a mystic suggestion that the chieftain's sword may not be idle forever: "Then, at Liberty's summons, like lightning let loose, / Leap forth from thy dark sheath again!" In the 1895 setting and the Recitation, the music rises at the end to a triumphant forte.

The Recitation opens with a statement of the hauntingly beautiful theme, at first softly on first violins and violas, then gradually becoming fuller. A soft side drum roll then ushers in the reciter. Stanford resolves the problems inherent in a recitation with orchestra – those of coordinating speech and orchestral rhythm with a speaker who may not be a musician at all – by simply sidestepping them. Except for occasional tremolo strings, and a couple of drum rolls, reciter and orchestra alternate rather than combine. After the orchestral introduction, the orchestra stays silent as the reciter unfolds the first verse:

Lay his sword by his side — it hath served him too well
Not to rest near his pillow below;
To the last moment true, from his hand ere it fell,

[1] https://ehms.lib.umn.edu/. Visualized 2.7.2024.

Its point was still turn'd to a flying foe.
Fellow-labourers in life, let them slumber in death,
Side by side, as becomes the reposing brave —
That sword which he loved still unbroke in its sheath,
And himself unsubdued in his grave.

Piano-pianissimo tremolo strings enter and for the next three lines the reciter alternates with soft phrases on the clarinet and flute:

Yet pause — for, in fancy, a still voice I hear,
As if breathed from his brave heart's remains; —
Faint echo of that which, in Slavery's ear,
Once sounded the war-word, "Burst your chains."

As printed in the English Heritage edition, it appears that the voice recites the last two lines against the phrase played by the flute, but Stanford's manuscript is clear. The voice enters after the flute has finished and speaks these lines, at first over the crescendo by the tremolo strings, then concluding over the crescendo timpani roll, so that "Burst your chains" is followed by a crescendo and fortissimo crash from the full orchestra.

The voice is on its own once more to recite the increasingly dramatic lines that follow almost till the end:

And it cries, from the grave where the hero lies deep,
"Though the day of your Chieftain for ever hath set,
Oh leave not his sword thus inglorious to sleep —
It hath victory's life in it yet!

"Should some alien, unworthy such weapon to wield,
Dare to touch thee, my own gallant sword,
Then rest in thy sheath, like a talisman seal'd,
Or return to the grave of thy chainless lord.
But, if grasp'd by a hand that hath learn'd the proud use
Of a falchion, like thee, on the battle-plain,

After a few brief bars for brass alone, rising to a dramatic forte, the voice states the final line over a crescendo timpani roll.

Then, at Liberty's summons, like lightning let loose,
Leap forth from thy dark sheath again!"

Here, too, the EH edition is misleading, implying that the reciter should pit himself against the full orchestra in this last line. Stanford's MS is once again clear. The orchestra waits for the speaker to finish before breaking in with the final triumphant phrase.

On paper, this ending seems too summarily brief but I suspect, without having actually heard a performance, that, with a sufficiently dramatic delivery by the reciter, it would work. "Work" is the operative word here. Stanford did not unduly stretch his genius, simply providing the minimum necessary by taking a ready-made tune and dressing it in orchestral colours not dissimilar to those in the Rhapsody.

Yet I see no reason why it should not prove effective. As so often, Stanford hit the nail on the head without undue fuss.

Was it ever performed, and why did he write it?

The Professional Classes War Relief Council

I cannot answer the first question, beyond saying that I have found no reference to a performance. The score might be expected to show a few pencil marks in another hand, however, if somebody had actually conducted from it. As to why it was written, a clue might be found in this article in the Musical Times of 1 July 1915:

> *THE MUSICAL PROFESSION AND THE WAR: AN APPEAL*
>
> *The problem of aiding the professional singer and instrumentalist during the War is becoming increasingly acute. Soon after the War broke out many organizations sprang into being and did valuable work in creating engagements for performers. But now their activities are being crippled in every case for lack of means. It is with no intention of disparaging the laudable efforts of other workers in this field of usefulness that we venture to give special prominence to an account of the operations and needs of the Committee of Music in War Time, a body which was formed last year and afterwards amalgamated with the Professional Classes War Relief Council.*

The object, the article explains, is

> *To develop schemes for the employment of people in the musical world during the War, and to deal with cases of distress in the musical world which may be attributable to the War.*

A full list of Committee members follows. The Chairman was Hubert Parry and many still-remembered names appear on the list: Frederick Bridge, W. W. Cobbett, H. C. Colles, Walford Davies, Elgar, Mackenzie, Walter Parratt, Landon Ronald, Vaughan Williams, Henry Wood – and Stanford. The latter may have been a later addition, since a 1914 brochure of the Professional Classes War Relief Council lists most of the same Committee members, but not Stanford.

The article goes on to tell us that

> *The extensive and eminently utilitarian operations of this organization are almost unknown to the general public, owing to the fact that they are not day by day advertised and reported in the newspapers.*

These operations included 176 concerts in hospitals, 89 in camps and 124 in "clubs, schools and other institutions". A total of 389 concerts, with 1,318 engagements. Since this makes an average of 3.4 performers engaged per concert, there would seem to be no place for a recitation accompanied by full orchestra. So what, if anything, has this laudable endeavour to do with *Lay his Sword by his Side*?

At least once, as the article reported, the organization went big in its campaign for funds:

> *A grand Patriotic Concert was held at the Royal Albert Hall on April 24, when Their Majesties the King and Queen and Queen Alexandra were present. The profits were divided equally between the Professional Classes War Relief Council and the Lord Mayor's Recruiting Bands.*

The combination of April 24 and the completion date for *Lay his Sword* of March 16 is suggestive. What more likely than that Stanford, having just joined the Committee, should dash off a contribution to their upcoming big concert? If this was so, then unfortunately the piece was almost certainly not included. According to the Musical Times of 1 June 1915, the Royal Choral Society sang a chorus from Parry's *Ode on St. Cecilia's Day*, and Percy Fletcher's *The Song of the Grey Seas* ("a straightforward, telling piece of work"). Massed military and recruiting bands, amounting to over 400 performers, played *The British Army Quadrilles* under Captain Mackenzie-Rogan and the band of the Coldstream Guards played the March from Elgar's *The Crown of India*, Mackenzie's *Britannia* Overture and Elgar's *Carillon*, recited by Madame Tita Brand-Cammaerts. Ruth Vincent, Lily Elsie, Kirkby Lunn and Ben Davies provided songs. Presumably a new recitation with orchestra by Stanford would have been mentioned. It is difficult to imagine the sombre tone of this piece fitting into what seems to have been a predominantly rousing, even tub-thumping programme. Its rejection, if it was proposed, is understandable.

Why a Recitation?

But why venture into the hitherto unexplored realm of recitation with orchestra? The answer may lie in the eternal one-upmanship that apparently gripped Stanford whenever Elgar hove in sight. The previous year, Elgar's recitation with orchestra, *Carillon*, with words by the Belgian poet Emile Cammaerts, had caught the public mood perfectly and was performed all over England. The original reciter, the poet's wife Tita Brand-Cammaets, repeated her performance at the April 24 concert. Anything Elgar could do …. But the choice of a poem by Thomas Moore was less likely to capture public imagination at a time when a certain part of the British public resented the fact that the Irish had chosen these difficult war years to push their case for home rule and independence. Moore, moreover, was a romantic patriot and his chieftain's sword, if it were ever to be unsheathed again, would surely have fought to save the Irish from the English, not the English from the Germans. It was well-known, of course, that Stanford was a fervent Unionist who had no time for home rule. His choice of such a poem at such a time is another of the many contradictions that surround his personality.

Why not commission a poem more likely to chime in with the national mood? The poet laureate, Robert Bridges, was a friend of Stanford's and long ago they had collaborated in his oratorio *Eden*. He would have been an obvious choice, but many other living poets would surely have been honoured to collaborate with a composer whose reputation still stood high. The problem was likely one of time. If Stanford needed to knock up something in a hurry for the concert on April 24, use of a pre-existing poem was inevitable.

It has not escaped me that *Lay His Sword* was completed on the eve of St. Patrick's Day. This led me at least to consider an alternative hypothesis that the recitation was put together – in nick of time – for a specifically Irish recurrence, or for the funeral of a major Irish figure. I have found no reference to a contribution by Stanford to any such commemoration. There are a couple of intriguing possibilities, though. One is Lord Frederick Roberts. In 1917, Stanford dedicated his Fifth Irish Rhapsody to "the Irish Guards (officers and men) and to the memory of the Colonel-in-Chief, the late Earl Roberts". "Bobs" had actually died on 14 November 1914, so the recitation could be an earlier tribute to him. More generically, on a single day, 1 February 1915, twelve Irish Guards and fourteen Coldstream Guards had died in a combined operation at Cuinchy, near Béthune in France. Given that the band of the Coldstream Guards was playing at the April 24 concert, how better to begin than by remembering their dead? Except, as we saw above, that it was not to be that sort of programme.

Brander Matthews and a Projected Ballet

The only hint we have, to the best of my knowledge, that Stanford was actively planning to write a ballet score comes from *These Many Years, Recollections of a New Yorker*, an autobiography by Brander

Matthews[2]. Matthews (1852-1929) was once a writer of considerable fame. He was Professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University, New York, from 1892, but spent a certain amount of time each year in Europe from the 1880s onwards. His particular haunt in London was the Savile Club, to which he was elected a member in 1885. Stanford, too, was a habitué of the Savile Club and their paths crossed more than once.

> *Another of my Savile friends was Charles Villiers Stanford, the composer; and we collaborated on a ballet for which I devised the libretto and for which he was to write the music. The project was captivating; yet now after an interval of more than a score of years I fear it is likely to remain a project only. I prepared the book and Stanford made ready the themes he was to employ in the score; but the playwright and the musician are dependent upon the ballet-master, who has to elaborate the pantomimic suggestions of the librettist and to indicate to the composer how many bars must be allotted to every successive episode. Neither at the Alhambra nor at the Empire, the homes of ballet in London, was Stanford able to persuade the chorographic authorities to agree to produce our joint work. I confess this has been a disappointment, since I thought there would have been a sort of piquancy at the announcement of a ballet at either the Empire or the Alhambra (the least scholastic of establishments in their atmosphere), having its book written by the professor of literature at Columbia University and the score composed by the professor of music at Cambridge University.*

Perhaps the latter point was the real issue. If ballet lovers today lament that their favoured art is treated as a poor relation to opera, this is nevertheless a step upwards from Victorian times, when ballet was regarded as a vulgar adjunct to the Music Hall. The two theatres mentioned, both in Leicester Square, did not open their doors to "serious" composers until the 20th century, and probably felt that their patrons would not wish them to do so. It is a pity that Matthews does not tell us anything about the subject matter of the proposed ballet, but the suspicion is that the theatre managers took fright at the mere name of a composer of symphonies and oratorios.

It is also interesting to note that, in those days, ballet music was expected to fit the pre-arranged dance patterns of the ballet-master, rather than have the latter derive a suitable choreography from the music. Interesting, too, that Stanford was prepared to go along with this rather than compose freely.

Ballet at the Alhambra

Ballet at the Alhambra and its followers certainly had a poor reputation abroad. A fire at the theatre resulted in its temporary closure in 1882, leading the New York constabulary to fear the worst:

> *Now that the London Alhambra has been burned down and all the English noblemen's mistresses among the ballet and the variety people generally will be sent over to America to put in time profitably until the dive can be rebuilt, so we may expect to be surfeited for a year to come with ballet and the peculiar variety features that please the dissolute nobles of England. The Pimples of Gotham and elsewhere in the new world who are so anxious to ape European manners and vices will now have a chance to take the express train on the road to ruin, for the quality of girls the Alhambra will send over is just the style to go through the boodles of our ninnies in the shortest possible time. This acceptance of dramatic and variety baked meats at second hand will probably assume the proportions of a regular king's evil for it does not stand to reason that monarchical and republican tastes can mingle without bringing on some clashing climax.*
> The National Police Gazette, New York, 30 December 1882

[2] Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1917, pp.420-421.

The transatlantic reputation of the Alhambra was so far advanced, indeed, that, when a few years later a fire broke out at the original Alhambra in Granada, it resulted in a journalistic howler worthy of Evelyn Waugh's Sir Jocelyn Hitchcock:

> *The burning of the Alhambra Palace at Granada has thrown a vivid light on [the] question of journalistic virtue. There was a San Francisco editor, to wit, who, not subscribing to any foreign news agency, was content to borrow his latest telegrams from his contemporaries. So, having noticed the line, "Fire at the Alhambra" on the notice-boards of another journal, he turned on his most picturesque reporter to concoct a description of the occurrence. Unfortunately, he imagined that the London Alhambra was meant, and the despatch gave a harrowing picture of the ballet-girls rushing wildly into the street, "mit nodins on" but their brief and airy stage dresses. Moreover, said the "telegram," the Queen had sent a message of condolence. Of course, the editor's mistake was discovered; and he offered the remarkable excuse that whereas every American knew of the London theatre, very few had ever heard of that in Granada.*
> The Musical World, 27 September 1890

This is not to say that the Alhambra never aimed high:

> *A grand ballet, Titania, founded upon The Midsummer Night's Dream, at the London Alhambra, professes to carry out Wagner's idea of the union of the arts, by a combination of dance, poetry and music, and thus elevate Shakespeare.*
> The Musical Courier, 21 August 1895

From the ridiculous to the sublime! The composer of this Ballet was Berlin-born George Jacobi (1840-1906), who was Musical Director at the Alhambra from 1872 to 1898 and wrote a long series of ballet scores, including *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* (1894), *Blue Beard* (1895), *Rip Van Winkle* (1896) and *Beauty and the Beast* (1898)[3]. An additional impediment to Matthews' and Stanford's proposal may have been a disinclination on Jacobi's part to have a serious composer with a European reputation butting in on his private domain. An exception was made for Sullivan, whose Jubilee ballet *Victoria and Merrie England* was produced in 1897.

Back to Stanford

London in the last Victorian decade, then was an unlikely place for a ballet by a serious composer.

Can we date the aborted project? Matthews' autobiography is arranged mainly by subject matter and jumps back and forth chronologically. However, writing in 1917 he said that "more than a score of years" had passed, so that takes us to a few years before 1897. His other major encounter with Stanford, which he relates immediately afterwards, led to his suggestion that George H. Jessop, with whom Matthews had collaborated several times beginning in 1885, might be the man to take on the libretto of *Shamus O'Brien*, at a standstill after the death of the original librettist W. G. Wills. *Shamus* was completed on 14 January 1895, so logically Stanford would have been busy on the score for most of 1894. Conversely, Matthews mentioned that he was professor at Columbia when the proposal was made, so the projected ballet could not have been conceived before 1892. The likely date, therefore, is 1892 or 1893.

The other question is, did Stanford make any attempt to rescue the music he had sketched out? Obviously, we can only speculate, but in 1894 he produced a number of somewhat balletic piano pieces. The slight

[3] Jane Pritchard: *Archives of the Dance (24): The Alhambra Moul Collection at the Victoria and Albert Museum*. The Journal of the Society for Dance Research, Vol. 32, No. 2 (Winter 2014), pp. 233-257.

but charming Mazurka op. 42 no. 6, dated 6 May 1894, remained unpublished, yet he thought enough of it to recycle it as the fifth of his *Night Thoughts* op. 148, published in 1917. The modern dances in the *Ten Dances Old and New* op. 58 (published 1895) could have slotted into an Alhambra ballet without sounding excessively highbrow. In later life, Stanford showed a certain fascination for the formulas of light dance music, notably and most exhaustively in the *Scènes de Ballet* op. 150 for piano (1917). Maybe echoes of the projected ballet found their way into this and similar works. But equally, he was fecund enough to have written new music in all these cases.

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