Stanfordian Thoughts

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

by Christopher Howell

29. Carols, Anthems and Songs for Christmas

Sir Henry Wood[1] recalled a hilarious episode in 1927 when Edward, Prince of Wales[2], attended a dinner at the Royal College of Music.

> The Prince sat opposite me with Sir Hugh Allen[3] on his right. … During dinner the Prince noticed a new portrait (by Orpen) of Stanford which hung on the opposite wall.
> "Who is that?" he enquired.
> "I don't expect Your Highness will know him: he is Sir Charles Villiers Stanford," replied Sir Hugh.
> "Of course I do. He wrote the *Hallelujah Chorus.*"
> "Oh, no, sir. Handel wrote the *Hallelujah Chorus*."
> "Good Lord! What a bloomer!"
> The Prince roared with laughter in which we all joined.

I am not sure how well versed the present Prince of Wales is in classical music, but the previous incumbent, now King Charles III, though seemingly more drawn to Parry than to Stanford, would certainly have known that Stanford did not wrote the *Hallelujah Chorus* and, almost equally certainly, could list a number of works he did write. He would also know, I am sure, that Parry wrote an exceptionally fine Christmas piece, the *Ode on the Nativity*[4], but, if pressed to name a Christmas work by Stanford, I suspect he would be at a loss. A glance at the Stanford catalogue shows that there is no major offering comparable to the Parry, or for that matter to Mackenzie's *Bethlehem*. Even if we cheat and include Advent, and maybe cheat further to include *Pastorales* for the organ, which older tradition associated with Christmas, the best I can come up with is a string of short pieces amounting to 60-70 minutes of music. I shall deal with them chronologically. Some have been discussed in other articles in this series – I shall avoid repeating myself as far as possible.

How Beautiful upon the Mountains – Anthem for Advent (1868)

In 1868, fourteen-year-old Stanford signed his anthem *How Beautiful upon the Mountains* "Christmas 1868" at the foot of the score. At the head of the music it is described as "A short anthem for full chorus for Christmas 1868", so he must have finished it a while before if he was to stand a chance of having it performed. Whether it actually was sung at a Christmas service that year does not seem to be known[5]. The text is the well-known passage from Isaiah, strictly an Advent text, but many Christmas services like to take Isaiah's prophecy as their starting point. A score is available from English Heritage[6] but if anyone has taken it up, it does not seem to have found its way onto CD or even YouTube. It would be over-imaginative to find premonitions here of Stanford's mature religious style, but within the context of mid-

[1] Sir Henry Wood: *My Life of Music*, Gollancz 1938, p. 403.
[2] Subsequently Edward VIII and, following abdication, the Duke of Windsor.
[3] Director of the RCM from 1918 to 1937.
[4] See John Quinn's review of the very fine Lyrita recording by Sir David Willcocks: https://musicwebinternational.com/2023/12/parry-ode-on-the-nativity-lyrita/
[5] The earliest known performance took place on 1st October 1989, when the Choir of St. George's Church, Jesmond, Newcastle upon Tyne, directed by Frederick Peacock, sang it in an edition prepared by Frederick Hudson. See Frederick Hudson, *A New Catalogue of the Works of Charles Villiers Stanford 1852-1924, compiled from the original sources*. Typescript, 1994, B. 9. The link to a PDF copy which I have given in previous articles seems no longer to work.
[6] https://ehms.lib.umn.edu/how-beautiful-upon-the-mountains/

Victorian church music it is of some interest. The young Stanford avoids the oozing chromaticism of his elders and supposedly betters and instead springs a few harmonic surprises and modulations to suggest he was already open to more modern trends. The organ mostly doubles the choir but shows occasional signs of independence. The gentle Mendelssohnian opening theme is attractive and the second section, "The Lord reigneth", marked *Allegro vivace*, gives the chorus a good sing. Even if we do not find Stanford's real voice here, he already shows an ability to write a piece that "comes off". Now that it is readily available, there could be no harm in including it in occasional Advent or Christmas programmes, though it is unlikely to displace Stainer's attractive setting (1880) as the standard anthem on these words.

***A Carol* for voice and piano (1893)**

Stanford's next Christmas piece came a quarter of a century later, when a setting of *A Carol* by Arthur Quiller-Couch was published by Kassel in 1893[7]. It was dedicated to Frank Robinson. This may have been the only son of Joseph Robinson, a major musical figure in the Dublin of Stanford's youth and of whom he wrote appreciatively and in some detail[8]. However, Joseph Robinson's son Frank, if the dedicatee was he, was only about ten in 1893 – perhaps he was a budding boy soprano[9].

Quiller-Couch (1863-1944) is mainly remembered as a critic and as the compiler of the *Oxford Book of English Verse*. He was nevertheless a prolific novelist and published three volumes of poems. *A Carol* was gathered into *Poems and Ballads by 'Q'*.[10] Stanford sets the first two of the five verses identically, thereafter making small adjustments both to the vocal line and the accompaniment. Each verse ends with the refrain "In excelsis Gloria!" and all but the first take the form of question and answer, as in the second:

"Where is the royal Babe arrayed?"
Lo! He is in a manger laid;
The Lord of Life an ox's guest,
But warm He lies on Mary's breast:
Then sing, and rest you undismayed,
"In excelsis Gloria"!

This piece is usually listed in Stanford catalogues as for voice and piano[11], though Dibble places it under unison songs[12]. The score indicates "voice" rather than "voices", implying solo performance, while the "accompaniment" is indicated precisely thus. The natural assumption is that it will be played on the piano, but the only recording I have traced, by Walter Weizflug and Selma Asprino[13], uses an organ. In truth, while there is no pedal part requiring an organ, neither is there any need for the piano's sustaining pedal, so perhaps Stanford deliberately left options open. The marking *Allegro tranquillo* led me to suppose a gently undulating interpretation of the piano/organ part, but Asprino adopts a more rhythmic approach which is quite stirring. Weizflug offers a straightforward interpretation except where he consistently alters the rhythm in the bar preceding the "In excelsis gloria". He makes minimal characterization of the questions and answers, but an excess in this direction could easily lead to caricature. Whether or not there would be any authority for a performance with unison voices, I suggest there is more future for the song in this form. This would allow soloing out of the questions or, if voices of solo calibre are not available,

[7] It was also reprinted in *Q Anthology*, ed. F. Brittain, J. M. Dent 1948, pp. 19-21.
[8] Stanford: *Studies and Memories*, Constable 1908, pp. 117-127.
[9] Information about Joseph Robinson is easily found, but nothing about Frank's subsequent career has come to light.
[10] Methuen 1896, p. 95
[11] See Frederick Hudson, *ibid*, L. 32.
[12] Jeremy Dibble, *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, OUP 2002, p. 484.
[13] This seems to come from a CD called *Cânticos de Natal*, but is now only on YouTube, with no information about date or location.

some sort of varying division between male and female voices for the questions and answers, with everybody singing "In excelsis gloria". The melody itself is attractive, while the refrain has a quasi-modal character; rather than a triumphant ending, it leads on to the next verse while the last time round the piano/organ has a brief postlude finishing *pianissimo*, as of a vision that fades from view. As we shall see, the painting of an idealistic Christmas scene from long ago, something we see yet no longer see, is frequent in Stanford's Christmas music.

***As with Gladness/Orient* for SATB (1894)**

I have discussed *Orient/As with Gladness Men of Old* in my article on Stanford's hymns[14], so I shall repeat here only my conclusion that no congregation is likely to welcome it as a substitute for the famous tune by Conrad Kocher, as adapted by W. H. Monk. Moreover, if anyone, sharing the dislike of William Chatterton Dix, the author of the words, for that traditionally used tune, attempted such a substitution, there is the problem that the tune changes at the end, which would likely confuse the congregation. As a part song for unaccompanied SATB – which appears to have been Stanford's intention – this gently lilting tune could be attractive at a Christmas choral recital[15].

***A Carol for Christmas* op.67 no. 1 for SATB (1897)**

In my article on Stanford's part songs[16], I described *A Carol for Christmas*, the first piece in the third set of *Six Elizabethan Pastorals* op.67 (1897), as "an attractive and useful Stanford piece rather than an inspired one". I would add here that the poem by Edmund Bolton, which metaphysically equates the shepherds of Elizabethan England to those who witnessed the angels in the fields above Bethlehem, confirms Stanford's attraction toward verse that portrays the Christmas story as a far off legend.

Tunes can we hear, but not the singers see;
The tune's divine, and so the singers be.

The poem, taken as a whole, offers potential for a dramatic setting, even a mini-cantata along the lines of Parry's *Ode on the Nativity*. Stanford's gently pastoral, strophic setting offers the singers little scope for dramatic characterization, but finds some justification in that it "frames" the words as a brief, unattainable vision. In further defence, I would add that the combination of a fairly high tessitura and a use of harmonic suspensions and pedal points to create a surprising level of dissonance in the context of an extremely diatonic style results in a harsh, starlit radiance that could be hypnotic in performance. That said, I continue to find it strangely unmemorable – almost every other piece discussed in this article lingers more in my mind. But this is a personal reaction and perhaps a performance will come along that convinces me[17].

***Behold the Bridegroom cometh nigh/Geronimo* – Hymn for Advent (1904)**

The 1904 edition of *Hymns Ancient and Modern* included an Advent hymn, "Behold the Bridegroom draweth nigh," set to Stanford's *Geronimo*[18]. A workmanlike tune in the German chorale tradition, it acquires a certain Stanfordian tone as it moves from the initial E flat major through C minor and then to

[14] https://musicwebinternational.com/2024/01/stanfordian-thoughts-22-hymn-tunes/, p. 6
[15] A modern edition is included in *An Edwardian Carol Book* ed. Jeremy Dibble, OUP 2006.
[16] https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2018/Dec/Stanfordian_thoughts_8.pdf, p. 12
[17] This is also included in *An Edwardian Carol Book*. The OUP site offers, as an audio sampler, a complete performance of this piece which, though anonymous, seems to me very good. A YouTube performance given in 20 December 2025 by the Angelica Choral Ensemble of Bloomington, Minnesota, needs caution. The director has "corrected" Stanford's soprano line at bar 10 and the same place in verse two (these 1897 dissonances were apparently too much for 21st century Minnesota!) and only two verses are sung. Tempo is a personal matter, but their attempted jolliness only proves to me that it is not a jolly piece.
[18] I have discussed Stanford's contribution to the 1904 HAM in my article on his hymn-tunes, *ibid*. pp. 8-13

G minor before returning rather abruptly to the major. Though it ends with a standard supertonic-dominant-tonic cadence, the melody itself ends on the dominant not the tonic, leaving a slightly inconclusive impression resolved by the final *Amen*. None of these subtle points made it a favourite in its day or are likely to do so now. However, the poem, a translation from the Greek, is printed with the original beside it. If the Greek words are can be sung to the tune – I am not competent to judge this – maybe a choirmaster in search of an international angle to their Christmas concert might take a look at it.

***Arise, Shine* – Anthem for Advent (1905)**

Advent remained the theme of an anthem Stanford published in 1905 – *Arise, shine*[19]. If this very fine piece never caught on, it may be because it has certain features audiences do not associate – or wish to associate – with merry Christmas cheer. The opening section, in a radiant D major and in rollicking 6/8 time, makes an inspiring beginning. After this, the words "For behold, darkness shall cover the earth" are sung entirely in unison against threatening chords from the organ. 6/8 is resumed with "But the Lord shall arise upon thee", working gradually back to D major and a resounding climax on "and kings to the brightness of thy rising". Unexpectedly, perhaps, the music fades and "Glory to God in the highest" is sung *pianissimo*. As in *A Carol*, Stanford seems to want us to imagine a vision that passes from our view. Too thoughtful, I daresay, for the "family Christmas service", but too good to be left unsung. Surprisingly, there seems to have been only one recording so far. Fortunately, the performance by the St. Alban's Cathedral Choir under Andrew Lucas[20] is excellent.

***A Song of Peace* op. 113 no. 4 for voice and organ (1909)**

1909 saw the publication of the one piece surveyed here which most readers will know – *A Song of Peace*, the fourth of the *Six Bible Songs with Chorales* op.113. I have dealt with this major work in some detail[21]. I will only add here that, while Isaiah's prophecy "There shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse" is regularly used for Advent or in the first part of a Christmas service, Stanford's title, together with his addition of the chorale *Pray that Jerusalem may have peace and felicity*, suggests that he had a wider agenda than a specific church season. Obviously, this does not mean that the song cannot be effectively sung at Advent or Christmas, though not with the chorale. If a following chorale is desired, *Behold the Bridegroom cometh* might be considered.

***A Carol of the Nativity* for SATB (1909)**

A Carol of the Nativity first appeared in *The Daily Express* of 9 December 1909 as "Stanford's New Christmas Carol for Express Readers". It was issued in more permanent form by Houghton and subsequently, in 1913, by Novello[22]. The words are described as by Bishop Coxe, but something odd has happened. The American Bishop Arthur Cleveland Coxe published, in 1840, a carol which begins "Carol, carol, Christians, carol joyfully", whereas the poem set by Stanford begins "Carol, sweetly carol, Sing most joyfully". Thereafter, the two texts mostly correspond, though with the refrain shortened and with an almost completely different fifth verse (of six), which a note in the score tells us was "rewritten by H. F. Manly, Esq. M.A." There is, however, a carol which begins "Carol, sweetly carol". This was published in 1869 by another American, Fanny Crosby. Apart from the opening gambit, the text set by Stanford bears no resemblance to Crosby's. So either Manly's alterations were not limited to the fifth verse, or someone else preferred Crosby's beginning over Coxe's and did a pick 'n' mix operation accordingly.

That said, the music is very attractive. Whoever grafted Crosby's beginning onto Coxe's poem enabled Stanford to create a memorable opening phrase in which Scotch snaps arise naturally from the rhythm of

[19] Hudson, *ibid.* B. 12a, describes it as "an anthem for Christmas".
[20] Priory PRCD 733, issued in 2000.
[21] https://musicwebinternational.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Stanfordian-thoughts-20.pdf
[22] See Hudson, *ibid*., B. 21

the word "carol", followed by a typical modal touch in the second bar. The natural rhythm of the words also results in some triplet quavers as the melody builds up effectively. A change of rhythm for the conclusion of the refrain, "Sing most joyfully" – this also not as written by Coxe – creates a satisfying end. The following verses are basically strophic, but Stanford continually adjusts the rhythm to the new words and verse 3 begins with an exchange between sopranos/altos and tenors/basses. Intriguingly, at the beginning of verse 4, the pick 'n' mixer reverts to Coxe's original "Carol, carol, Christians", allowing Stanford to vary the rhythm of the phrase. Given the obvious musical gain, it is difficult to avoid thinking that Stanford himself had some hand in these adjustments, though it was not his usual habit to play around with the texts he set. A further surprise comes at the end. Thus far, the music has been for unaccompanied SATB and there is no suggestion that an accompaniment is needed. But in verse 6 the organ enters, complete with pedal part, to make a grand ending. This could be a moving moment if the choir has held its pitch, an embarrassing one if it has not. There is no indication that the organ is *ad libitum* and, since the choir sings part of this last verse in unison, omission of the organ part would not be very effective. Better omit the last verse if the choir cannot reliably hold its pitch. Another play-safe solution could be to have the organ accompany verses 1 and 4 with light stops, and perhaps omit verse 2 altogether[23].

***Once in Bethlehem in Judah* for SS choir and piano/organ (1911)**
***There came a little child to earth* for SATB (1911)**
***In the Snow* for SATB (1912)**
In 1911-12, Stanford published three Christmas carols with Morgan & Scott. According to Hudson[24], the titles and publication details were:

> *Once in Bethlehem of Judah*, in *Carols Ancient and Modern*, vol. 2 no. 16, 1911
> *There came a little Child to earth*, in *Carols Ancient and Modern*, vol. 1 no. 2, 1911
> *In the Snow*, in *Carols Ancient and Modern*, vol. 3 no. 29, 1912

Very little information is available about these publications. A brief roundup of recent publications in the Adelaide Register of 23 December 1911 describes *Carols, Ancient and Modern*, from Morgan & Scott Limited of London, as "two sixpenny books, each containing the words and music of a dozen carols". The titles are listed, showing that Hudson's numbers refer to the entire series rather than the individual volumes. *Once in Bethlehem* also crossed the Atlantic to Boston, where it was published, accompanied by a charming woodcut, in *Carols Old and Carols New*, ed. Charles L. Hutchins (The Parish Choir, Boston, 1916, no. 651). *In the Snow* also appeared in *The University Carol Book* (A. W. Ridley, Parts I and II combined, no. 12, 1932).

The three carols are not to be considered a set, but demonstrate Stanford's attraction towards the idea of a far off, legendary Christmas scene. The first four lines of each show this clearly:

Once in Bethlehem in Judah,
Far away across the sea,
There was laid a little Baby
On a Virgin Mother's knee.

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[23] This is the third, and last, Stanford item included in *An Edwardian Carol Book*.
[24] *Ibid*. B. 23.

There came a little Child to earth,
Long ago;
And the angels of God proclaimed His birth,
High and low.

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Oh, never a footprint was seen in the snow,
And never a sound was heard,
That first Christmas morning, when shepherds did go
To the manger to greet their Lord.

Once in Bethlehem in Judah is a hymn written by Cecil Frances Alexander (1818-1895). Alexander, like Stanford, was an Anglo-Irish Dubliner, remembered for her hymns *All things bright and beautiful*, *There is a green hill far away*, *Once in Royal David's City* and *St. Patrick's Breastplate*, of which the latter is usually sung in Stanford's arrangement. *Once in Bethlehem* used also to be quite popular as sung to Maunder's tune *Bethlehem*[25].

Stanford provided a very simple setting for a female choir of just sopranos, who sing the verses in unison and divide into two parts for the chorus. The accompanying instrument is not specified. As with *A Carol*, it requires neither organ pedals nor the piano's sustaining pedal, so presumably either instrument is permissible. The music, especially the opening phrase, has great charm. It could also be cited as a demonstration, in miniature, of Stanford's harmonic methods. Though the opening phrase is technically in B flat major, it sounds to all effects like G minor with a flattened leading note. We realize it was B flat major only when, at the end of the second phrase, Stanford quite unexpectedly reaches the dominant F major. The refrain passes through a touch of actual G minor and there is a trace of subdominant harmony as the final cadence is approached. Attractive as this is, one wishes Stanford had gone a little further. The same brief music serves for all six verses[26] – most people today will be satisfied with three or at most four. A few varied verses, or at least varied accompaniments, would not have been amiss. All the same, the melody is beautiful enough to withstand a few repetitions and females choirs might take a look at it.

There came a little Child was also a pre-existing hymn, written by the English poet E. E. S. [Emily Elizabeth Steele] Elliott (1836-1897). Several changes have been made to the words, enabling Stanford to maintain the folk-like tone with which he set "Long ago" and "High and low" in the first verse. In the fourth verse, for example, "In that goodly land"" and "That chosen band" become "In that land" and "That blest band". These changes are so obviously to the benefit of the music that it is difficult to imagine that Stanford himself did not make them, or have somebody make them for him.

The music is set for SATB chorus. The accompaniment is indicated for organ and there is nothing to suggest it is optional, or for rehearsal only. However, the organ merely doubles the voice parts, so more would be gained than lost by having at least the two middle verses (out of four) sung *a cappella*. There if a folk-like, even legendary tone to the music, with its opening three-bar phrases. A Stanfordian equivalent, perhaps, to Tchaikovsky's *Legend*, and not an unworthy one. In line with the folk manner, there are no real modulations, certainly not to the dominant – just a few subdominant touches here and there. Here, too, one wishes he had gone a little further, maybe varying the melody for the third verse, but perhaps Morgan

[25] The Bostonian *Carols Old and Carols New* has this too, as no. 434. With a neat little piece of cost-cutting, the same woodcut is used for both.
[26] I am assuming that the version in the Boston publication, which is all I have, has not been simplified with respect to the Morgan & Scott original.

& Scott had stipulated strophic settings. Nevertheless, this is another attractive piece worth considering, though three verses might be enough.

Little seems to be known about K. W. Lundie, the author of *In the Snow*, though Hudson[27] discovered that she was a female – he refers to her as "Miss" – and that the poem was slightly later included in the author's volume *English Echoes from the Quartier Latin* (E. Mathews, 1912). He also says the text is based on Luke 2: 16. While it is true that this verse describes the shepherds going to the manger, it makes no mention of the (historically improbable) "snow so deep". Lundie makes the snow the focus of her message. Having begun as above, in the last verse she tells us that

Now many a footprint is seen in the snow,
And joyous tones are heard,
As we leave our toil and cares and go
To the manger to greet our Lord.

Hudson also tells us, lastly, that it is a "carol for SATB or voices in unison (short score)". The version in the *University Carol Book*, which I have seen, gives no such indication[28], but the music is written in short score like a hymn, rather than on four staves like a part song, and with the other three verses printed below as poetry, again like a hymn, so it would be fair enough to have at least one verse, or part of it, sung in unison with organ accompaniment. On the whole, this is the least interesting of the three Morgan & Scott carols. It has something of the folk-tone of *There came a little child* and has some pleasing touches, but is less individual harmonically. Furthermore, the poem is slightly irregular and, in particular, "Peace and good will" in the last verse, unless the music is altered, will be sung with a strong accent on "and", so it is a pity Stanford did not adapt the music to the individual verses as he did with *There came a little Child*.

***A Carol of Bells* for voice and piano (1915)**

On Christmas Day 1915, amid World War II, Stanford penned *A Carol of Bells* for voice and piano[29]. With words by Louis N. Parker, it salutes the Christmas bells of London, laments the silent bells of Belgium – "the Huns have torn them down" – and concludes with the words "God save the King". It is not, therefore, a suitable text for a Christmas service and I mention it only for its passing Christmas connection[30]. A little later, in 1918, Stanford published it as *Ring, Christmas Bells of London* and also arranged it as a part song for SATB. He – or Parker – altered some of the topical allusions, but not nearly enough. Even if somebody took the trouble to provide it with new, properly Christmassy words, the neat quotation from the National Anthem woven into the final bars would remain as evidence of its original purpose. This is rather a pity, since the music has the joyous swing we expect of Christmas music. At the time I wrote my previous article, I had not seen the SATB version. This has now been issued by ChoralWiki. It proves a masterly transformation into a completely different medium and would surely be enjoyable to sing. But its place is in a concert of music inspired by war. The voice and piano version was recorded almost immediately by Gervase Elwes and Frederick Kiddle (L 1152, issued April 1917). So far as I am aware, the only modern version is that by the Italian mezzo-soprano Elisabetta Paglia, accompanied by myself[31].

[27] *Ibid.* B. 2.

[28] Hudson doubtless also saw the original Morgan & Scott edition; perhaps this was more explicit and also included the Luke reference.

[29] Hudson, *ibid*. L. 50, says it was composed in 1916, but the date is printed clearly at the foot of the published score.

[30] I have discussed it in my article on Stanford's patriotic songs: https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2022/Aug/Stanfordian-thoughts-15.pdf

[31] Da Vinci Classics C00608, issued 2022. Reviewed for MWI by John France http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2022/Oct/Stanford-songs-v2-C00608.htm and Jonathan Woolf https://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2022/Nov/Stanford-songs-v2-C00608.htm.

***The Winds of Bethlehem*, op. 175 no. 3 for voice and piano (1920)**
***The Monkey's Carol*, op.175 no. 4 for voice and piano (1921)**

Stanford's last set of songs for voice and piano, the Six Songs, op. 175, brought together a mix of authors including two last settings of W. M. [Winifred Mabel] Letts (1882-1972), upon whose work he had drawn frequently, in particular for the cycle *A Fire of Turf* op. 139 and the set *A Sheaf of Songs from Leinster*, op. 140. Letts was born in England but spent much of her life in Ireland and is normally considered an Irish poet. She concentrated particularly on rural Irish scenes and often wrote in semi-dialect, but the two poems appearing as nos. 3 and 4 of op. 175 are not specifically Irish, do not use dialect, and have Christmas themes, albeit unusual ones. *The Winds of Bethlehem* was published in 1920, *The Monkey's Carol* in 1921. The former adopts the legendary-mystical tone which seemed to attract Stanford so strongly and imagines a scene where the Baby Jesus is visited by the four winds, each bearing its different gifts. The still opening and close have both simplicity and poetry, while the piano plays around the voice as the winds are depicted, the music gathering intensity. This song is difficult to bring off since the voice often seems thinly supported by the piano. Singers approaching Stanford are often surprised to find that the piano parts tend to be in counterpoint to them rather than simple support. In the first recording – there have only been two so far as I can discover – James Griffett sometimes seems under strain as the vocal line climaxes. He has an attractively plangent tenor voice with a virtually no vibrato, well suited to the lighter pieces on his two records[32], less so where drama is needed. He does not make life easy for himself by taking a very slow tempo, arguably more *Andante* then the written *Allegro moderato*. Soprano Kitty Whately[33] adopts a more flowing pace, shaving over a minute from Griffett's timing. She has a richer voice and, at the other extreme to Griffett, a marked but well controlled vibrato. I enjoyed some of her songs on this CD very much but here she does not, to my ears, go beyond singing it well and with clear diction. In the end I return to Griffett who, in spite of, or even because of, the drawbacks mentioned, expresses a sense of wonder and of straining after some distant goal.

If *The Winds of Bethlehem* has remained a rare Stanford song, *The Monkey's Carol* was one of the few that never entirely disappeared when Stanford's reputation was at its lowest. The poem depicts Christmas through the eyes of the organ-grinder's monkey who, viewing the festive cheer from outside in the cold street, is compelled to beg for his ailing master as he grinds away willy-nilly away in the hope that someone will take pity and throw him a few pennies. The piano part is pervaded by a brief phrase evoking the *organetto*. This passing similarity with Schubert's *Der Leiermann* should not tempt performers to take it too slowly – the marking is *Allegretto* and, sad as is the monkey's plight, his mood swings as he remembers a past life in his native land and he also finds it in his heart to wish the town folk "much merriment / And peace and love this Christmas-tide". As a testimony of this song's one-time popularity, the BBC Programme Index shows nine broadcasts between 1922 and 1948[34], as against only one of *The Winds of Bethlehem*[35]. These are:

Vivienne Chatterton (soprano), 22 December 1922
Dale Smith (soprano), Angus Morrison (piano), 29 March 1925

[32] Hyperion A 66049 and 66058, recorded February-March 1982 with pianist Clifford Benson.
[33] SOMM CD 0655, recorded January 2022 with pianist Susie Allan.
[34] https://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/search/0/20?q=stanford+monkey%27s+carol#top. It should be added that vocal programmes sometimes appeared in the *Radio Times* of those days listing composers without titles, or the singer(s) only, so it is impossible to know if other performances of this song were broadcast.
[35] By Isobel Shaw (soprano) and an unnamed pianist, 4 April 1924, part of a programme remembering Stanford, who had recently died.

John Thorne (baritone), Band of H. M. Royal Air Force/J. Amers[36], 1 April 1928
Alexander Hanna (bass-baritone), The Station [Glasgow] Orchestra, 5 January 1929
J. Gilmour Barr (baritone), 17 January 1930
Albert Bettany (bass-baritone), 9 January 1931
John Thorne (baritone), BBC Orchestra (Section C)/Victor Hely-Hutchinson
Frederick Sharp (baritone), Angus Morrison (piano), 26 May 1938
Robert Irwin (baritone), Frederick Stone (piano), 16 February 1948[37]

Only one subsequent broadcast of each song emerges: *The Monkey's Carol* by Mary Wells (soprano) and Wifred Parry (piano) on 19 July 1971 and *The Winds of Bethlehem* by Mark Rowlinson (baritone) and Stephanie Bamford (piano) on 24 December 1982.

I have not traced an earlier recording than the Griffett/Benson, on the Hyperion LPs mentioned above. This takes a straightforward course through the song, at a plausible *Allegretto*, and lets the music speak for itself. I only queried the *più lento* ending, which seems to me too drawn out. I still find Griffett's voice not especially ingratiating and I am much happier with the 1990 recording by Sarah Walker (mezzo-soprano) and Roger Vignoles (piano), part of an anthology called *Dreams and Fancies* (CRD 3473). Moreover, while Walker does not exaggerate either tempo or expression, she and Vignoles penetrate that little bit further, bringing the scene before our eyes. Of the recordings I have heard, this was the one that actually moved me – it is surely one of the few classic recordings of a Stanford song.

In 2016, this song was included in an anthology called *Songs of Church and Childhood* by treble Harvey Brink and Martin Neary (piano) (H & H Music)[38]. I query the pianist's decision to play the chord on the second beat of each bar containing the hurdy-gurdy motive *staccato*. This is not indicated and seems to me to spoil the mood. That said, it is a nicely sung rendering, though it does not convince me the song is best heard from a child singer. A YouTube performance from a live concert at St. Anne's Church, Lewes, Sussex, on 18 December 2020 by Ruth Kerr (soprano) and Nick Houghton (piano) demonstrates the inadvisability of adopting a slower tempo than Stanford's marked *Allegretto*. At this speed, the hurdy-gurdy motive in the accompaniment loses its remorseless effect – the show must go on – and both singer and pianist are patently trying too hard, with results that are rather laboured. There are a few changes to the words, too. In a 2021 anthology entitled *"The Holy Boy" – Christmas in Albion*[39], Timothy Dickinson (bass-baritone) and Duncan Honeybourne (piano) adopt a tempo that is nearly as slow but, with a richer voice in the lower key, this works rather better. Even so, the monkey's melancholy is expressed at the expense of his sweet memories and generous good wishes – Griffett and, above all, Walker, kept a better balance between all these elements. On the 2022 Somm CD referred to above, op. 175 was divided between Kitty Whately and Gareth Brynmor John (baritone), to whom was allotted *The Monkey's Carol*. It is a decent, straightforward reading that I would have appreciated more if I had not heard Walker. A performance by Helena Keane (soprano) and Graham Jackson (piano) was published on YouTube in 2022 without any indication of location or date. Keane's bright, almost boyish timbre produces a performance very similar to Brink's (her timing is also identical, slightly faster than any other recording). As with Brink,

[36] In the case of this and the orchestral programmes listed, it is likely that an unnamed pianist accompanied the vocal items, which alternated in small groups with the orchestral/band selections. This was standard practice at the time.
[37] This was a programme of ten Stanford songs shared between Kathleen Ferrer and Robert Irwin, without any indication, in the *Radio Times*, of who sang which. Of the other songs included, *La Belle Dame sans Merci* and *The Fairy Lough* are known to have been in Ferrier's repertoire, and the performance of the former has survived, as has a later performance of the latter. Equity would require that she sang another three, but if this list of her repertoire, compiled from her own note-books, is complete, we must conclude that she did not: https://401dutchdivas.nl/en/joops-favorites/kathleen-ferrier/163-kathleen-ferrier-lijst-van-haar-repertoire.html
[38] I have not traced a physical release of this programme, which is available from various online sources.
[39] Prima Facie PFCD 170.

the sadder shades are missing. Lastly, Walter Weiszflug and Selma Asprino, on the anthology which also included *A Carol*, offer the experiment of an organ accompaniment. This has the effect of making the hurdy-gurdy motive sound similar to a genuine *organetto*. Maybe with this in mind, Asprino chooses a rather heavy, reedy registration. On the whole, just a curiosity, and the singer's diction is lax in places.

***At Christmas-Tide*, op. 182 no. 1 for organ**

The first of Stanford's *Six Occasional Preludes* op. 182 for organ is his sole instrumental piece with a specifically Christmas theme – it is entitled *At Christmas-Tide*. The set was published posthumously only in 1930. Stanford's usual dating is not reproduced at the foot of the score, so we can only deduce from the opus number a composition date of 1921. Though not so-called, *At Christmas-Tide* is a chorale-prelude on *Adeste Fidelis*, but Stanford teases us slightly. He begins with the opening notes of the theme in the pedals, but instead of two initial equal notes – two E flats since the piece is in that key – he gives us B flat and E flat, so the listener not primed to expect the famous carol is left wondering – is it or isn't it? The organist's hands on the manuals fill the air with joyful, bell-like scales while the well-known theme rumbles away down on the pedals, gradually rising upward into the texture. There is a glorious burst of C major triumph after which the second part of the theme rings out unmistakably in the upper parts. All this in the space of little more than two minutes. A miniature masterpiece.

To the best of my knowledge, the first recording was made by myself in October-November 2009, using the single manual 1832 Felice Bossi organ in the Church of San Lorenzo, Lessona, Piemonte, Italy (Sheva SH 025). My MWI colleagues wrote kindly of the performance but noted issues with the recording and the organ itself that I would not attempt to deny[40]. Even if this recording had not been deleted some years ago, it would have been comprehensibly superseded by Daniel Cook on the last disc of his five-volume survey of Stanford's complete organ music. He captures its rising excitement and has all the resources of the Westminster Abbey organ and the famous acoustic at his command (February 2016, Priory PRCD1174). It seems strange that such a fine piece has had only two official recordings so far, but a trawl around YouTube turns up another eight. Two of these document performances in major Cathedrals – Oliver Morrell in Durham on 22 December 2020 and David Cowen in Leicester on 20 December 2024. They both aim for a slightly more majestic interpretation. Most majestic of all is Pattnet – this is the only name given – in St. Paul Parish, Cambridge, Massachussetts, USA, on 2 December 2012, who stretches the piece out to almost three-and-a-half minutes. If it initially sounds cautious, as the music proceeds this Celibidache-style reading gathered a slow momentum and, as stop was piled upon stop, a Brucknerian conviction. All the same, I do not really think *Allegro* means this. Much more joy is heard in another performance from Italy, by Giulio Piovani on the organ of the Waldensian Temple in Milan on Christmas Day 2021. It sounds to be a splendid instrument. Some audience shuffling suggests that the recording was made by somebody down in the nave during a public service or recital but it is nice to hear an Italian organist playing Stanford with evident conviction. Other performances use some sort of electronic instrument. Techniques have developed since the old Jennings I used to play at school and several are described as Hauptwerk plus the name of a specific organ whose sound is supposedly reproduced. My immediate reaction is to look down on this sort of thing but after all, if you listen to an organ through the loudspeakers or headphones of your own home rather than sitting inside the building with its specific acoustics, this is an artificial electronic sound picture anyway. Setting aside my prejudices, these sound remarkably plausible and the performances range from competent to rather more. Of particular interest are Michael Cloud (Hauptwerk sample set of the Willis organ in Hereford Cathedral, posted on 23 December 2023), who has the theme booming out on the pedals so as to dominate the texture. I am not sure this does not give Stanford's game away – surely the listener should become only gradually aware that *Adeste Fidelis* is being played, though I do not doubt that the genuine Hereford instrument would

[40] http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2010/Dec10/Christmas_Selection.htm

have the resources to do as Cloud does here. Paul Swinden (Hauptwerk St. Mary-le-Bow, 5 December 2023) is the swiftest of any and his instrument has an absolute clarity suggesting that the Hauptwerk set, while plausibly imitating the sound of the organ, may transport it into another acoustic, such as the organist's garden shed, though I write this without knowledge of the St. Mary-le-Bow acoustic.

***Lo! He comes with clouds descending*, op. 192 no. 1 – Anthem for Advent (1922)**
***While Shepherds watched*, op. 192 no. 2 – Anthem for Christmas (1922)**

In November 1922, Stanford completed a final set of three anthems, op. 192. All three use well-known hymn texts and the first two are respectively for Advent and Christmas – *Lo! He comes with clouds descending* and *While shepherds watched*. The former opens with a rising triad motive which creates an immediately uplifting effect and returns frequently as a leitmotiv. This and Stanford's firm control of overall harmonic structure bind together what could be a discursive discussion of the hymn's various points – instead, momentum is maintained. There is a more mellifluous section where the music passes to three-time from the original four and, after a pause, there is a powerful statement of what sounds like a hymn tune, beginning with the rising triad. It is not, however, the tune customarily sung to these words, *Helmsley*, nor any of the many alternative tunes listed at Hymnary.org[41], so I presume it is Stanford's own invention. Regarding the rising triad, *Helmsley* does, of course, begin this way, but so does another Advent hymn, *Wachet auf*, usually sung in the UK, at least in Stanford's day, to the words *Wake, O wake, for night is flying*. The general rhythm of Stanford's music is more likely to remind listeners of this. Perhaps Stanford noted that two well-known Advent hymns began with these three notes and used them as the leitmotiv for his own composition. I have traced no commercial or even YouTube recording of this anthem. My impression is that it is finely effective but perhaps shorter on memorable phrases than of yore. A dedicated performance might prove otherwise.

While shepherds watched begins with a gentle organ introduction in a lilting 6/8 pastoral vein, in line with Stanford's preference for remembering Christmas by painting scenes of long ago. This introduction introduces a brief three-note falling phrase – B flat-A-F – which recurs as a leitmotiv throughout. The organ music alternates with unaccompanied passages for the choir – the way their first phrase rises to a striking chord on "flocks" shows that he retained at least a part of his former magic. A more dramatic interruption announces the Angel of the Lord, whose message is sung by a bass soloist. Stanford perhaps relies here excessively on all-purpose declamation – he does not summon up the memorable phrases of the *Nunc dimittis* in G or the *Bible Songs*. A choral crescendo describes the "shining throng of Angels praising God" and the Angels' words "All glory be to God on high" are sung *fortissimo* to the opening phrase of the German Christmas chorale *Vom Himmel hoch*. This chorale is not continued. The remaining words are sung *piano*, as though the Angels are disappearing into the distance. Phrases from the second part of *Winchester Old*, the tune to which these words are traditionally sung, are woven into the texture. A brief organ postlude, concluding with the three-note leitmotiv, ends the piece in Stanford's "vision endeth" manner.

A YouTube recording of this piece comes, amazingly, from the 2008 Christmas concert of the Gymnasium (High School) of Barntrup, a small town in the North Rhine-Westphalia district of Germany. Gratitude for their efforts has to be tempered by the observation that the results are somewhat underwhelming. The young bass soloist sings musically and in tune but his thin tone only proves that this passage needs a budding John Shirley-Quirk to bring it off. Nor has the small choir the weight needed for the *Vom Himmel hoch* quotation. This piece could, I am sure, be effective with the resources of a larger cathedral choir and a good bass soloist.

[41] https://hymnary.org/text/lo_he_comes_with_clouds_descending_once, viewed 17.11.2026

Carol arrangements in *The National Song Book* (1906)

A couple of loose ends remain. Firstly, the carol arrangements in *The National Song Book*, described as *A complete collection of the folk-songs, carols, and rounds suggested by the Board of Education (1905), edited and arranged for the use of schools by Charles Villiers Stanford* and published in 1906. It contains just six carols, of which four are specifically stated to have been arranged by Stanford. These are *God Rest Ye Merry Gentlemen*, *Good Christian Men Rejoice*, *The Wassail Song* and *Three Kings of Orient*. An arranger is not named for the other two, *The First Nowell* and *Good King Wenceslas*. These are handled in a stylistically similar manner, but I shall limit my discussion to the four to which Stanford put his name. The extreme simplicity, even miserliness, of the accompaniments, which often play simple chords without doubling the voice part, is explained in Stanford's introduction. "The accompaniments are of the simplest character, and are intended to suggest sufficient harmony to make clear the tonality of each song, and in some cases to reinforce the characteristic rhythm, without distracting the attention of the singers from the melody itself." In other words, he wished the children to learn the tune and not depend on the piano for a lead[42]. Whether or not we agree with his thesis, the upshot is that we will not find here the sort of personal touches that raise many of his Irish folk song arrangements to the level of art song. He uses, moreover, a strange version of *God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen*, with a sharpened note at the end of the second bar and a continuation unlike that usually sung today. *Good Christian Men Rejoice*, too, is not the version generally used today and seems to be an 1853 adaptation, with the "News! News! News!" addition, by John Mason Neale[43]. *The Wassail Song* is uncontroversial, but a modicum of interest attaches to Stanford's treatment of *Three Kings of Orient*[44]. This carol is in E minor but with the refrain in G major. This does not usually seem to bother anyone, perhaps because it ends with a plagal not a perfect cadence[45]. As originally published, though[46], there was a six-bar "intermezzo" printed at the end, bringing the music back to E minor. Most subsequent hymn books omitted this, but a few included it up until at least 1893[47]. Stanford has four bars at the end, the last three identical to the Hopkins original, which he must therefore have known. He does not indicate whether it is an "intermezzo" or just played at the end. It could equally be used as an introduction, since there is none[48]. Used as an introduction, postlude and intermezzo between at least some of the verses, the arrangement would have a trace of the personal touch missing in the others.

***Prelude in the form of a Pastorale*, op. 88 no. 5, for organ (1903)**
***Pastorale*, op. 193 no. 1, for organ (1923)**

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[42] Elsewhere, he stated a strong belief that children should be taught early to read music and not sing by ear: "I doubt if a proposition to recite a piece of poetry without being able to read it would be thought worthy of a grant … I ask the same for music. If you teach it, teach it thoroughly by note; and cease to give a premium for a smattering which is useless as well as superficial. No system which teaches a child that a certain sign represents a certain sound, either absolutely or relatively, can in its essence be mischievous. What is mischievous is haphazard training, and of all such haphazard methods "singing by ear" is the most dangerous, unless it is rapidly corrected by the influence of singing by note" (*Elementary Schools: How to Increase their utility, being Six lectures delivered to the Managers of the London Board Schools in 1889 and 1890, with Preface by William Bousfield*, Percival & Co., 1890, pp.34-35).

[43] Since this is not a British tune anyway, it is not clear how it found its way into the *National Song Book*.

[44] Another hymn that logically should not be in the *National Song Book*, since the words and tune were written by the American John H. Hopkins in 1857. We will charitably suppose that Stanford's brief was to set songs already chosen by the Board of Education. Hopkins's authorship is acknowledged.

[45] A few earlier editions visible at Hymnary.org., but not Hopkins's own, change the last line of the refrain to finish with a perfect cadence in G major.

[46] In Hopkins's collection *Carols, Hymns and Songs*, New York, 1863.

[47] e.g. *The Church Porch*, P. Dutton, New York, 1893.

[48] Some early publications have a brief "symphony" at the beginning, but not the Hopkins original, so presumably it is not by him.

Having cheated to include Advent music, I shall also cheat, as I stated at the beginning, by including organ *Pastorales*. In Italian baroque music, a *Pastorale* was invariably a gentle piece in 6/8 or 12/8 time, usually for organ though the most famous example is from Corelli's "Christmas" Concerto, depicting the shepherds in the fields on Christmas night, just before the Angels' great announcement. Later on, perhaps following the example of Beethoven's "Pastoral" Symphony, the label tended to be attached to any piece evoking the countryside, so there is no specific proof that Stanford intended his two to have a Christmas association. They do, however, conform to the tradition of a gentle piece in a rocking 6/8 or 12/8 time.

The first of them, *Prelude in the Form of a Pastorale*, is the fifth of *Six Preludes* op. 88 and is dated 14 June 1903[49]. It alternates typical pastoral music with chorale-like passages and, after an innocent opening, is notable for chromatically moving inner parts and some quite abrupt modulations. In the first recording, made by Jane Watts in March 1992 on the Lewis organ of Kelvingrove Art Gallery, Glasgow (Priory PRCD414), the chromaticisms sound jarring and the registrations seem harsh at times. Combined with a rather stolid tempo, the piece makes a rather dry effect. To what extent this is the fault of the organist, or whether this was not the organ and/or acoustic for the job, is difficult to say. Doubtless many who heard it blamed Stanford, but Daniel Cook, in the first instalment of his complete survey of the composer's organ music, shows that the music can come off the page. Recorded in Salisbury Cathedral in August 2012 (Priory PRCD1095), he adopts a more mellifluous tempo and avoids heavier or harsher stops even in the *forte* passages. The result is that the chromatic lines melt into one another with an almost impressionist effect, proving that Stanford knew what he was doing. Lovely as this is, Simon Niemiński, recorded in October 2012 on the Brindley and Foster organ of Freemasons' Hall, Edinburgh (Resonus RES 10130), is marginally lovelier still. The pedal notes at the beginning spread balm and, though his tempo is similar to Cook's, he lets the music breathe that little more and his registrations, acoustic and recording sound that little bit warmer. This was the second instalment of a projected cycle of Stanford's organ music, with a different organist for each volume, which appears to have stopped here.

Slightly surprisingly, in view of the amount of Stanford's organ music turning up on YouTube, I have found no further recording, perhaps a reflection of the fact that, if you do not have the right instrument or acoustic, it is better to leave it alone.

The other *Pastorale* is the first of *Four Intermezzi* op. 189, published in 1923. It covers similar ground, with a gently rocking opening and a chorale-like central section. There does not seem to have been a recording before Daniel Cook's, in the fourth volume of his cycle. This was recorded in Westminster Abbey in August 1915 (Priory PRCD1161). He does not convince me that the musical material here is as memorable as in the other piece. His tempo is on the upper side of an *Allegretto* and the music flows mellifluously without saying a great deal. Perhaps because of his tempo, the *Poco più mosso* indicated for the chorale section is not observed – the tempo remains the same. No other commercial recording seems to have been made.

Two recordings appeared on YouTube in 2024. Giulio Piovani, uncharacteristically, does not name his instrument or venue. Whatever the organ, it has a noisy action – the siren of a passing police car outside is also heard. Piovani is audibly wrestling to get a decent performance out of an instrument not really equal to the task and his good intentions emerge only intermittently. It falls to Jerry Martin to prove that this piece, too, can sound simply lovely. Whatever the Armley Schulze sampleset organ actually is, it makes the right sounds and Martin, at a slower tempo, allows the music to breathe and the poetry to emerge. He alone makes the flute trills as the final section begins sound beautiful rather than mechanical. This piece, too, needs careful handling to bring it off.

[49] See Hudson, *ibid*., J3.

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Before concluding, I will note that anyone preparing a programme around the Christmas story starting with the Annunciation has numerous settings of the *Magnificat* by Stanford from which to choose. Perhaps, in this context, that in G, with its depiction of Mary at the spinning wheel, would be the most suitable.

I daresay an entire Christmas concert dedicated to Stanford's music for Advent and Christmas would amount to an excess of zeal, but I hope I have shown that there are several attractive pieces awaiting discovery by choirs and organizers willing to stray off the beaten track. CDs – or their downloadable equivalents – of Stanford's church music are not uncommon these days and the music I have discussed would neatly fill an attractive and unusual one.

Christopher Howell © 2026

See previous articles in this series.