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

5. Beyond the Symphonies, Rhapsodies And Concertos: The smaller orchestral works

The earliest purely orchestral work that Stanford is known to have written – and which has survived – is a **Concert Overture in A minor**, completed on 30 July 1870, when Stanford was not yet 18. So far as is known, it was not performed until the BBC Concert orchestra under Martin Yates presented it in Dorchester Abbey on 26 May 2017, as part of the English Music Festival.

It is a Mendelssohnian affair, with a slow introduction and a rather cheery – in spite of the minor key – main Allegro. Given the composer's age, it almost alarmingly efficient in its formal handling and motivic working out. The rather catchy second subject tends to stay in the mind. All the same, it hardly strikes the listener as music of youth – Stanford was to achieve this ere long in his first chamber works. It certainly has none of the boldness and dash of Sullivan's music for *The Tempest*, which he wrote at about the same age.

The Dorchester performance was broadcast and circulates among collectors. Martin Yates subsequently set it down for Dutton with the Royal Northern Sinfonia, a disc recently issued which principally contains Stanford's early, unnumbered, concertos for piano and for violin. This hasn't reached me yet, but Yates' Dorchester performance suggests all will be more than well. It is lively, well-phrased, with plenty of dynamic shading but without trying to make the music any more than the modest, well-schooled offering it is. The Dutton disc is reviewed here and here.

A **Festival Overture in B flat** was conducted by Charles Harford Lloyd at the Three Choirs Festival, Gloucester, on 6 September 1877 and repeated at the Crystal Palace under August Manns on 17 November. Maybe the Manns performance was the better one, since critical comment was more favourable second time round. Parry, for example, who heard both performances, somewhat revised his negative first impressions after attending its London outing[1]. Critics also found it superior to the First Symphony[2]. Unfortunately, the manuscript is missing.

The first four movements of the **Serenade in G op. 18** were composed during a holiday in Switzerland in August 1881. The last movement was completed in Munich on 11 September[3]. Both Dibble[4] and Rodmell[5] have speculated that it may have been a reworking of an earlier Serenade for piano duet, an Andante and Scherzo from which were played by Stanford and Fuller-Maitland at a Cambridge University Music Society concert on 7 March 1877. From Munich, Stanford went on to Vienna, where he played the new work to Richter, who was "very enthusiastic about it"[6]. The Serenade was the result of a request for a new work to be presented at the 1882 Birmingham Festival. The performance took place on 30 August. As Dibble relates[7], the orchestra warmed to Stanford's work but had problems with Parry's First Symphony.

The conductor of the Birmingham Festival was Sir Michael Costa, who made it a rule never to direct living composers' music. Hence Stanford himself conducted the performance. Stanford recalled Costa as a "martinet", but also remembered with gratitude his kindliness towards the still inexperienced young man on the rostrum.

---

[1] Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press 2002, p.93.
[2] Dibble, p.104.
[3] Dibble, pp.121-3.
[4] Dibble, p.88.
[5] Paul Rodmell: Charles Villiers Stanford, Ashgate 2002, p.56.
[6] Stanford to Lyttelton 20 September 1881, quoted in Dibble p.122.
[7] Dibble, pp.124-125.

> *When I went up to rehearse …, he planted himself at my elbow following every note of the score, and giving me a secret prod when he wanted a passage repeated which I had passed over. The first movement (in 3/4 time) ended with a long* accelerando*, which I could not get to move to my satisfaction. It was my own fault, for I continued beating three to a bar. Costa prodded, and whispered to me under his breath "One beat will do it". So it did, and his next prod was one of satisfaction accompanied by a most un-Costa-like wink*[8].

Towards the end of 1883, Stanford's Serenade was listed among six novelties that Hans Richter would be producing during the winter season of the Vienna Philharmonic Orchestra[9]. The performance duly took place on 9 March 1884. Stanford's piece was sandwiched between Brahms's Tragic Overture and Beethoven's Violin Concerto, played by Arnold Rosé. The concert concluded with Robert Volkmann's Second Symphony. Stanford was less successful in Austria than in Germany, and this is the only work of his listed in the Vienna Philharmonic database. Incidentally, the Serenade is described there as op.17. This was Stanford's original intention, but before it reached publication this number had been bagged by the Three Cavalier Songs. Nevertheless, as late as 1921, Porte was still listing them the original way round[10].

Before the Vienna performance happened, however, the Serenade enjoyed another auspicious foreign debut, when Theodore Thomas and the New York Philharmonic Society programmed it in public rehearsal on January 18, and in concert the following evening. Stanford's Serenade opened the programme, followed by Beethoven's Leonora no. 2 and a Bach "Concerto in G" for strings (presumably the Third Brandenburg). The final item was Rubinstein's Fourth Symphony – the "Dramatic". Those who fancied the idea of a public rehearsal, but liked doing things in style, were warned that "The chandelier will not be lighted for the Public Rehearsal"[11].

The Serenade was subsequently discussed in some detail. The critic's ultimate view was far from flattering, but I quote his remarks in full, since this is a part of Stanford reception history I have not seen related elsewhere.

> *The opening Serenade, in G major, is the work of a rising English (or rather Irish), musician, Mr. C. Villiers Stanford, favorably known for some time by the promise of his orchestral writings, and more especially by a cantata* [actually an opera] *on the subject of Thomas Moore's "Veiled Prophet of Khorassan". Mr. Stanford is in his thirty-second year, having been born at Dublin in 1852. He holds the position (rare for so young a man in England) of organist to Trinity College, Cambridge, and is also conductor of the University Musical Society. The "Serenade," or rather "Suite," performed last night consists of five movements, an allegro, a scherzo, a notturno, a short intermezzo and a finale commencing allegro vivace and terminating with a lullaby. In the number of divisions it is patterned somewhat after Brahms's well-known op.11. Mr. Stanford's handling of his orchestra is quiet but masterful; he expresses what he has to say in elegant phrasing. Unfortunately he does not say much. There is a touch of Schumann throughout his ideas, and in the notturno and final lullaby he is decidedly commonplace. His work does not evince the thought and boldness shown by the other English composer, Mr. MacKenzie* [sic]*, whose compositions have been brought over by Mr. Thomas. After Mr. Stanford's feeble effort, the superb "Leonora" No.2 of Beethoven stood out with rare brilliancy*[12].

[8] Stanford: *Pages from an Unwritten Diary,* Edward Arnold 1914, p.203.

[9] New York Post 28 November 1883.

[10] John F. Porte: *Sir Charles V. Stanford*, Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1921, p. 23.

[11] The World, NY, 13 January 1884.

[12] The World, NY, 20 January 1884.

Commenting on the public rehearsal the day before, the same critic – presumably – had described the Serenade as "totally devoid of originality or inspiration"[13].

Both Dibble and Rodmell find a good deal more to admire in the Serenade, but it has so far escaped recording programmes. A BBC performance by the Ulster orchestra under Barry Wordsworth, broadcast on 4 April 1992, reveals it as a warm hearted, likeable piece. I do not find much Schumann here, but there is quite a lot of Brahms. The Scherzo has been likened to Beethoven, but it seems to me the one movement with a slight Irish accent. The repeated notes anticipate the hop-jig in the Irish Symphony or the "Come, boys, come" theme from *Shamus O'Brien*. Nor do I find anything commonplace about the *Notturno* or the Lullaby. There are hints from time to time that loveliness is going to open out into rich humanity, as Dvořák knew so well how to do. Could this Serenade of Stanford's make the leap in other hands? Stanford's reminiscences about Costa suggest that his first movement went, at any rate, rather differently. Wordsworth makes only a minimal accelerando towards the end and indeed, he is going so fast anyway that it is hard to see how he could have sped up much more. If Stanford had beaten the movement in three up to then without incurring Costa's wrath, surely he must have taken it at a more leisurely pace, savouring, for example, the waltz-like second subject. He could then have whipped things up considerably when the accelerando arrived. I am also sure the final Lullaby could have spun more magic at a slower tempo. I listened for the first time without knowledge of the movement titles and I must say it never occurred to me that the third movement was a *Notturno*, or the conclusion a Lullaby. Maybe a little more Martucci-like decadence might be extracted from the former, a little more gentle, smiling serenity from the latter. But I do not wish to labour the point. A performance on this level of Brahms' op.11 might be thick and turgid here and there, but it could not conceal the enchantment of the opening or the bucolic charm and memorability of most of the rest. Stanford's very nice piece does not contain anything quite like that.

Another missing work is the **Festival Overture in C – "Queen of the Seas"**. This is described as op.33 by Grove I and Dibble, op.38 by Porte. Both these opus numbers are otherwise occupied. Unless the score turns up, the confusion is unlikely to be resolved. The piece was written for the tercentenary of the defeat of the Spanish Armada and was performed in London on 12 December 1888. Parry thought it "very good, solid, bright, vigorous"[14]. Stanford thought enough of it to include it in his concert with the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra on 14 January 1889. There, for now, the trail ends.

In 1895, Stanford published Ten Dances (Old and New), op.58, a set of piano pieces for young players dedicated to his children Geraldine Mary (1883-1956) and Guy Desmond (1885-1953), then aged, respectively, 12 and 10. Stanford seems to have had a considerable fondness for some of these pieces. He lost no time in orchestrating nos. 3, 6, 8, 9 and 10 – Morris Dance, Saraband, Branle, Minuet and Passepied, as "**A Suite of Ancient Dances" op.58**. This was premièred on 28 August 1895 at a Queen's Hall Promenade Concert conducted by Henry Wood. Much later, on 6 November 1916, the orchestrated versions of nos. 3 and 6 were recorded for The Gramophone Company with an unnamed Symphony Orchestra conducted by Stanford himself. Moreover, the opening two bars of no. 3 were also used for the Morris Dance in the opera "Much Ado about Nothing" op.76A, though only as an orchestral ostinato while the chorus sing another melody.

Coming just a year after Parry's Lady Radnor's Suite, this seems like an attempt by Stanford to bag a slot in the same area. There are probably two reasons why it did not do so. Parry's scoring for strings-only represented a practical advantage that has grown with the years, given the sizeable British repertoire for string orchestra. More seriously, the final Passepied makes a far less exhilarating ending than Parry's Gigue. It may be that this piece can be made more zippy than it appears in the performance by the BBC Concert Orchestra under Alan Suttee (broadcast 30 November 1977), but I cannot see anyone transforming it into the sort of finale that brings the house down. I should hardly

[13] The World, NY, 19 January 1884.

[14] Dibble, p.203.

be the one to complain, in any case, since I adopted a similar tempo to Suttee's for my own recording of the piano version.

In general, Suttee and the orchestra give an amiable reading of the Suite, enabling us to hear that the orchestrations certainly add a dimension to the simple piano originals. Very dimly, through the murk of the 102-year-old recording, Stanford himself seems to give a more precise rhythmic profile to the two pieces he conducts. Since I have known these for years (from a 1974 Pearl LP), I may simply have got used to them that way.

1902-3 saw a couple of occasional works. **A Flourish of Trumpets for the Imperial Coronation Durbar, Delhi**, was completed in September 1902 for performance on 1 January 1903. It used twelve trumpets, timpani, side-drums, cymbals and bass drum and was published by Houghton. Punch of 8 January 1903 related:

> *The scene in the vast verandahed amphitheatre, opening out across the plain upon a vista of long avenues of foot and horse, British and native, was one to paralyse the pen. Among the happiest effects were the movements of the herald's trumpeters (who blew up STANFORD'S delightful fanfare); the crackle of the feu de joie that raced along the boundary line and back; and the sweep of the pennoned lances of the 4th Dragoon Guards, as they swung into line behind the infantry. The blazing scarlet of our officers' uniforms paled before the gorgeous velvets and silks and brocades of the Native Princes.*

The "Flourish" had at least one more outing. The New York Evening Post of 28 November 1911 – the New York press back then showed a surprising interest in aristocratic British doings – reported:

> *Queen Alexandra and a large party occupied the royal box at Covent Garden, when a performance was given in aid of the artistic profession. It resulted in a profit of nearly $7,500. The chief musical feature of the performance was the first stage performance in English of "Phoebus and Pan" by the German, Bach. An appropriate and inspiriting addition to the concert was the "Fanfare" written for the Delhi Durbar of 1903 by Sir Charles Stanford. It was played by the trumpeters of the First Life Guards, under Lieut. George Miller.*

"Phoebus and Pan" was J.S. Bach's secular cantata no.201. Twelve trumpets and several drums would certainly have created quite a stir after that, whatever the musical quality on offer. It should be pointed out that performances by brass and military bands, like performances by church choirs, leave little trace behind them – written programmes are few, press comments fewer. Since the First Life Guards evidently had a set of parts, they could well have trotted it out frequently.

A **Welcome March, op.87** was assigned an opus number but exists only in manuscript. Both Dibble and Rodmell suppose that it was written for the State visit to Ireland in July 1903

by King Edward VII and Queen Alexandra and Dibble adds that it was written in a great hurry, with Stanford breaking off work on his two String Quintets in order to finish it. Under the circumstances it would seem strange if it were not played, but Dibble has found no trace of a performance[15].

The **Four Irish Dances, op.89** are quite well-known in their piano transcription by Percy Grainger. Also available, in my own recordings, is Stanford's piano original and, with violinist Alberto Bologni, the three of the four that Stanford arranged for violin and piano. It seems strange, given their potential popularity, that Stanford's orchestral version, completed on 22 November 1903, has not appeared on CD, or even been broadcast in recent memory. It was included on a Rare Recorded Editions LP in the 1970s by an anonymous orchestra conducted by John Foster – see advert opposite in Gramophone of November 1974. I have never heard this.

Stanford completed his **Overture in the Style of a Tragedy, op. 90** on 7 December 1903. It therefore followed by ten years Parry's Overture to an Unwritten Tragedy, which had achieved publication and a fairly high profile by British orchestral music standards. Stanford's piece remained unpublished and Dibble suggests[16] that he may never have heard it performed.

It is nevertheless very fine. The striding, rising opening shows Stanford moving further in the direction of Richard Strauss than he would have thanked anyone for telling him. In general, the introduction into a post-Brahmsian idiom of more colourful orchestration and a touch of chromatic harmonic freedom is not so far removed from earlier Strauss. In this, it has much in common with Stanford's Sixth Symphony, op. 94, which followed a year and a half later. The parallel between the opening of the Overture and the Symphony raises an interesting point. In mood and key, the beginning of the Symphony implies an awareness of Elgar's In the South, an awareness which can hardly be denied, since Stanford had conducted the Elgar piece at the 1904 Leeds Festival. But it now appears that, while the parallel with Elgar's incipit can hardly have escaped him, Stanford was logically building upon his own Overture.

After the dramatic opening, the Overture contains much warm-hearted writing, with some lovely wind solos and a considerable range of mood – Stanford by no means labours the tragic aspect. Only the ending, though structurally logical, leaves one wanting more, maybe a radiant "ten years later" C major epilogue, or maybe just a timpani roll and an almighty C minor crash from the full orchestra. Nevertheless, this is a piece that should be heard and might have greater appeal than the Parry, which shed its dourness only when Sir Adrian Boult conducted it. At eight-and-a-half minutes, the Stanford should not be too hard to place. The BBC recording by the Ulster orchestra under Kenneth Montgomery, broadcast on 24 August 2010, is exceptionally good. Here, for once, we find that sense of the natural ebb and flow of the music that was to be heard in Boult's recording of the Parry overture – and much else – but which largely escaped Vernon Handley in his too-straitjacketed recordings of the Stanford symphonies.

Another occasional piece was the **Installation March, op.108**, for military band. This was commissioned for the installation of Lord Rayleigh as Chancellor of Cambridge University and played on 17 June 1908. Though unpublished and unrecorded in its military band form, an organ transcription by Stanford himself was published and can be heard on Daniel Cook's complete survey of Stanford's organ music – see review by John France.

The Installation March evidently aroused Stanford's passing interest in military band writing, for it was followed by a further set of **Three Marches for Military Band, op.109**. For some reason, Dibble does not list these, but Porte and Rodmell do. We learn from the latter that the manuscripts are in safe keeping at Newcastle. Dibble does tell us, though that Stanford wrote an **Ulster March** and a

[15] Dibble, p.350.

[16] Dibble, pp.356-7.

March for Orchestra for the Ulster Defence League around 1913. The surviving manuscripts are in short score only. No doubt they could be orchestrated if the music were deemed to warrant it.

Stanford's most substantial war-related project during the First World War was his series of five organ sonatas. In addition, he orchestrated the second and third movements of no. 2, the Sonata Eroica, op.151, entitling them **Verdun**. The Sonata itself had been dedicated to "Charles Marie Widor and the great Country to which he belongs". Verdun was performed in the Royal Albert Hall on 20 January 1918 and in Bournemouth under Stanford's own direction on 22 May 1918[17]. It also crossed the Atlantic, and was performed in the Carnegie Hall on 14 November and on 1 December 1918 by Josef Stransky and the New York Philharmonic Orchestra. The Brooklyn Eagle of 15 November 1918 dismissed it as "of little account" and indeed gave no account at all of the subsequent performance, merely mentioning that it was on the programme, but preferring to spend column space on an unfavourable analysis of Stransky's conducting of Tchaikovsky's Fifth Symphony.

The first of the two movements, a solemn march, is one of Stanford's finest inspirations in a rather Elgarian vein, and is beautifully transferred to the orchestra. The middle section is less memorable, but it provides an effective contrast and taken as a whole, this is a magnificent movement. It transcends its immediate purpose in a way the finale, now named "Heroic Epilogue", does not. Here we are led along by ingenious invention and consummate technique, as the Marseillaise gradually emerges from the argument to crown the conclusion. It is instructive to listen to the orchestral version following the organ score – Stanford's use of the side drum is notable. At a couple of points in the Solemn march, he adds an extra bar, filled only with the roll from the drum. And in the finale, what in the original is a reflective contrapuntal interlude, has its character changed completely by a persistent side-drum rhythm. At the end, whereas in the organ original only the first line of the Marseillaise is played, signed off with a flourish, here we get the whole thing in brassy panoply, rounded off with some fanfares.

The trouble is, as Tchaikovsky demonstrated in his 1812 Overture, if you want this sort of thing to come off, you have to lay it on really thick, and I fear Stanford could not quite bring himself to do that. A conductor in search of a dignified, noble piece for an important commemoration should feel free to play just the march. A broadcast performance of the complete two-movement score by the Ulster Orchestra under Howard Shelley, from a 2014 concert, displays considerable conviction.

A Song of Agincourt, op.168, was first heard on 25 March 1919 under Stanford's own baton at an RCM concert. This was one of three programmes commemorating the 25th anniversary of the opening of the College buildings in Prince Consort Road. Agincourt was "written in commemoration of those members of the Royal College of Music who fought, worked and died for their Country (1914-1918), and dedicated (by gracious permission) to the patron, His Majesty King George V[18]. Rodmell tells us that Stanford was "unsatisfied and revised it extensively before giving it again at the RCM on 4 July"[19]. It was then played by the Bournemouth Municipal orchestra under Sir Dan Godfrey on 16 October.

Such revision was fairly unusual for Stanford, who generally wrote swiftly and confidently and achieved his goal at first go. But then, the form of the work is unusual for Stanford, too. Having been criticized for writing Irish Rhapsodies to a close variant of sonata form, here he writes a rhapsody that, though not so-called, Liszt might have recognized as such. It is a little reductive to say that it is based on the famous Agincourt theme. This theme appears at the beginning and at various points along the way, but the work also incorporates a beautiful original, and very Irish, second theme in E flat and a foot-tapping Irish march. Variants of the Agincourt theme waft in and out at strategic

[17] Dibble, p.314.
[18] Dibble, p.446.
[19] Rodmell, p.317.

points. The result is a well-varied and well-controlled structure which should become increasingly satisfying as one gets to know it better.

A Song of Agincourt was broadcast on 4 July 2014 by the Ulster Orchestra under Howard Shelley. They give a very good account, revealing it as a work that, like the Irish Rhapsodies, deserves a regular place in our programmes.

The conclusion seems to be that a project to record these remaining unrecorded orchestral works would be more than a mere mopping up exercise. The band pieces and the fanfare would probably have to find their homes in a miscellaneous brass and military recital. The rest would occupy more than a single CD. It could be joined by the Irish Concertino or some orchestral movements from the operas or theatre music.

Christopher Howell © 2018

Previous articles:

1. Phaudrig Crohoore: An Irish Ballad for chorus and orchestra, op.62
2. Chamber Music with Strings
3. The Second Violin Concerto: Did the full score ever exist?
4. Irish Rhapsody no. 5