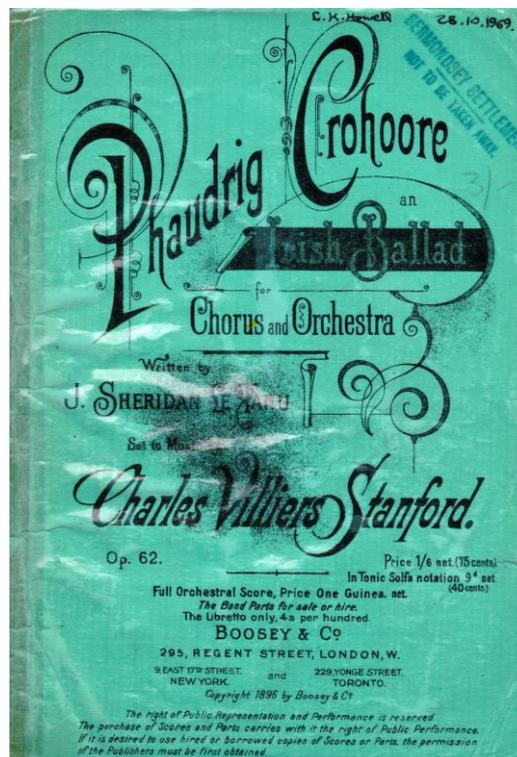


Stanfordian Thoughts
A periodic series of reflections on recorded and unrecorded works by Stanford
by Christopher Howell

1. Phaudrig Crohoore: An Irish Ballad for chorus and orchestra, op.62

The choral ballad “Phaudrig Crohoore”, op.62, was completed on 2 July 1895. It was in one respect an offshoot of “Shamus O’Brien”, op.61, the nearest Stanford came to popular success in the world of opera. Like “Shamus”, it was based on a narrative poem by Sheridan Le Fanu and centres around a bold, rough-hewn Irishman with a heart of gold, against a backdrop of family feuding and romance.

It also represented a further attempt to repeat, with a twenty-or-so-minute choral work within amateur reach, the success of Stanford’s earlier choral ballad “The Revenge”, op.24, based on Tennyson’s poem. This latter, ever since its first performance in 1886, had caught the British imagination in a way it is hard to believe, or even understand, today, and remained in view for the first part of the 20th century. Subsequent attempts on these lines had been “The Voyage of Maeldune”, op.34 (1889), another Tennyson setting, “The Battle of the Baltic”, op.41 (1891), to a poem by Thomas Campbell, and “The Bard”, op.50 (1892), with words by Thomas Gray. “Maeldune” –



– symphony-long, with four soloists, a more ambitious role for the orchestra and based on a mystic-legendary tale – really aimed at a different market. Despite the difficulties of mounting a performance, it might be the most likely of these works to engage 21st-century listeners. The similarity of “The Battle of the Baltic”, in manner and layout, to “The Revenge” induced reflections on the unwisdom of writing sequels, though it would be possible to admire its clearer construction. “The Bard”, which has a major part for baritone solo, is said by Porte to have roused enthusiasm in the Cardiff audience for which it was intended. Indeed, Porte considered it “a musical work calculated to stir the feelings of any lover of Cambrian history”¹. At a time when British naval exploits of yore tend to inspire a cynical smirk, it may be that “The Bard” would stand more chance today than “The Revenge” or “The Battle of the Baltic” but, after an imposing beginning, the music itself, at least on paper, does not always seem as inspired as Porte claimed.

So might the success of “The Revenge” be challenged with a piece on an Irish subject? Press reception to the premiere at the Norwich Festival, on 9 October 1896, looked promising. Most critics made the comparison with “The Revenge”. Musical News suggested it was “likely to capture the laurels hitherto won by the stirring ballad, ‘The Revenge’²”, while Daily News found the “elegiac epilogue ... a true touch of genius ... beautiful in the extreme”³. One dissenting voice, though not

¹ John F. Porte: Sir Charles V. Stanford, Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, London, 1921.

² Musical News, 17 October 1896, quoted in Smith, Peter John (2008) The choral music of Charles Villiers Stanford (1852-1924 and the press c.1875-1925. Masters thesis, Durham University. Available at Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/2542/>, p.167

³ Daily News, 10 October 1896, quoted in Smith, p.167

publicly expressed, was that of Parry, who found it “superficial and scarcely up to his usual level of scoring”⁴.

There was, though, a hitch. The Hallé Choir, confronted with the words

*... For he was the divil.
An’ there wasn’t a girl from thirty-five under,
Divil a matter how cross –
But he could get round her.*

refused point-blank to sing such improper stuff. Nothing their conductor, Sir Frederick Cowen, could say would move them, and he was compelled to substitute “The Revenge”. Other choral societies followed suit and Boosey, then preparing for publication, toyed with the idea of changing the words. Nearer to our own time, incidentally, if I had repeated the following too openly in my boarding-school days, I would have had sixpence docked from my pocket money:

*But Michael O’Hanlon loved Kathleen as well
As he hated Crohoore, an’ that same was like hell.*

Stanford protested indignantly that “The poem is recited even by parsons at penny church readings. William Le Fanu used to recite it in every drawing room in Dublin from the Lord Lieutenant’s down, and to children ... They object to ‘divil a matter’, an expression used by every man, woman and child in Ireland from the priest of the parish down. ‘Divil’ has no meaning ...”⁵. Fortunately, reasonableness prevailed. Le Fanu’s text was published unexpurgated and Smith⁶ has traced over sixty performances by the mid-1920s. The tail end of these cross with the Radio Times listings at the BBC Genome site⁷, which show that it was broadcast on 16 March 1925, 17 March 1926, 12 September 1929 (under Victor Hely-Hutchinson), 5 December 1929, 30 March 1933, 2 June 1934 and 6 February 1941 (under Boulton). It did not match the popularity of “The Revenge”, but it was certainly successful, and unlike “The Revenge”, there seems no reason why its appeal should be any less today.

Moreover, it made some inroads in the United States, where “The Revenge” was less likely to strike a chord. Unlike “Shamus O’Brien”, which had already crossed the Atlantic in 1896, “Phaudrig” took some time to arrive. I am dwelling on this part of the story since, while Dibble, Rodmell and Smith between them have given a full account of Phaudrig’s reception in England, I have not seen any discussion of its American history. My information, moreover, is from a site, “Postcards from Brooklyn” that no longer appears to be visible. It offered scans from a vast number of newspapers but was limited to the New York area.

The first mention appears in The Syracuse Journal of 18 March 1902, where we read that

At the rehearsal last night of the chorus of the coming Music Festival, Tom Ward, the Chorus master, announced that out of respect for St. Patrick’s Day the chorus would take up “Phaudrig Crohoore” and sing it once through. This composition is to be one of the choral features of the

⁴ C.H.H. Parry: Diary entry, 5 October 1896, quoted in Paul Rodmell: Charles Villiers Stanford, Ashgate 2002, p.188.

⁵ Stanford: Letter to Herbert Thompson, 30 December 1896, quoted fully in Jeremy Dibble: Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician, p.265.

⁶ Smith, p.271.

⁷ <http://genome.ch.bbc.co.uk/>

festival. It is a splendid musical setting to the Irish ballad, the words being by J. Sheridan le Fanu, and the score by C. Villers [sic] Stanford.

It was a graceful recognition of the holiday to give "Phaudrig Crohoore" a place in last night's rehearsal, and the chorus throwing themselves into the spirit of the composition, made a stirring contribution to the day's celebrations.

Preparations got under way in earnest the next month. The Syracuse Evening Herald of 1916 reported that

A regular rehearsal of the Syracuse Festival chorus was held last evening in the University block. The work considered was Villiers Stanford's "Phaudrig Crohoore" ... The members of the chorus sang with vigor and expression and brought out the beauties of the rollicking melodies to their fullest extent.

As the performance date of 22 April drew closer, interest quickened. The Post-Standard of Syracuse, N.Y., of 20 April 1902, takes up the tale:

As for "Phaudrig Crohoore", it has come so generally into public notice as a prospect that as a reality it is likely to center general attention. It is doubtful if any single number on any of the festival programmes will be talked about more than "Phaudrig" after the concerts are a thing of the past.

A fourth report, from the Syracuse Evening Herald, is from April 1902. The poor condition of the paper does not allow the exact date to be read in the scan, but it still belongs to the run-up period.

No feature of the music to be offered at the Syracuse Music Festival to be held April 21st, 22nd and 23rd is likely to overshadow the first production in Syracuse of Charles Villers [sic] Stanford's choral ballad, "Phaudrig Crohoore". Its composer is already widely known in this country by his prolific productions of church music, numbers of which have a place in all ceremonial occasions. "Phaudrig Crohoore" shows Stanford in a new light. In it he illustrates his power as a descriptive writer of music. Founding his composition on the romantic poem of J. Sheridan le Fanu, he has composed a work that has every requisite for popularity as well as all the qualities of a classic composition. The poem tells the story of an Irish Lochinvar, who wins his bride by the use of his strong right arm.

The writer goes on to give details of the story, quoting the poem from time to time. Unfortunately, my search came up with no account of the actual performance. However, all these reports were written after hearing the music in rehearsal, so it seems clear that "Phaudrig" was a success in Syracuse.

Two years later, the Rochester Democrat of Sunday 4 December 1904 announced that the "feature number" of the programme to be presented the following Tuesday by the Tuesday Musicale Chorus Association would be "Phaudrig Crohoore".

"Phaudrig Crohoore", with its delightful humor and touching pathos, is one of the most charming and characteristic works of Sir Villiers Stanford, composer, conductor and instructor. ... From the very first note to the last, the listener is in the atmosphere of old Ireland. An

ingenious use is made of those melodies of old Ireland that have been sung for hundreds of years.

On the last point, the writer had been fooled by Stanford's easy invention, for all the tunes were his own. Incidentally, it was not clear from the reports whether a full orchestra was used for the Syracuse performance, or just piano. Here, we are told, it would be accompanied by strings and piano. The same paper was a little clearer on the facts in an article the following day.

A chorus of 200 trained voices will present Sir Villiers Stanford's "Phaudrig Crohoore" for the first time in Rochester at a concert of the Tuesday Musicale Chorus Association tomorrow evening. This is one feature of the most elaborate programme ever offered by the chorus, which will be assisted by Dussenbach's string orchestra and John Young, the well known tenor.

Again, no report of the actual performance emerges.

Next, it was the turn of Geneva, New York. On 12 May 1905, the Geneva Daily Times reported on preparations for the May Festival of the Geneva Choral Society, to be held on 23 May.

The rehearsal of the chorus Wednesday night was well attended and was a very satisfactory one. The volume and purity of tone increases each week ... There is much enthusiasm on the part of all of the singers in all of the various compositions to be sung. Prominent among these is the Irish cantata, "Phaudrig Crohoore", which is a musical novelty, having a humorous vein as well as a lyric and dramatic one. The fact that it is in brogue adds to its attractiveness. The music is all strong and vigorous.

Stanford is not named here, but the complete programme is listed lower down, with his full names and title all spelt correctly. This time, too, a full orchestra was in attendance – no details, but Schubert's Unfinished was also on the programme (see below), so the necessary wind and brass should have been present. There was also a bass solo, of which more shortly. The Geneva Times gave further details on 20 May:

In the afternoon the leading feature is the Irish romantic cantata, "Phaudrig Crohoore", which tells an Irish love story in vigorous melody and charming harmony. Characteristic humor, virility, pathos and sentiment run throughout it and make it entirely unique in the realms of choral composition.

Space was also dedicated to the chorus of "nearly 200 active singers", the director, Heinrich Jacobsen, of Rochester, the orchestra which, as in Rochester the previous year, was that of Mr. Dossenbach, and the bass soloist,

... known as one of the best festival and concert bassos of America, Herbert Witherspoon, of New York, whose name in the metropolis is a synonym for all that is artistic and elegant in the vocal realm.

n f a s g s i t d t i o y y e d h n r g b e t	<p>THE PROGRAMS.</p> <p>Matinee.</p> <p>Part I.</p> <p>Salutation.</p> <p>Composed for and dedicated to the Geneva Choral Society by the Musical Director, Mr. Heinrich Jacobsen.</p> <p>The Choral Society, with Orchestra.</p> <p>The Unfinished Symphony ... Schubert The Orchestra.</p> <p>Group of Songs</p> <p>(a.) L'Esperto Nocerchio, (The Skillful Pilot) Buononcini</p> <p>(b.) For Ever and a Day..... Mack</p> <p>(c.) The Two Grenadiers, Schumann Mr. Herbert Witherspoon.</p> <p>Spanish Serenade Edward Elgar The Choral Society, with Orchestra.</p> <p>Ballatella—Aria from I Pagliacci, Leonecavallo</p> <p>Mme. Shotwell-Piper, with Orchestra.</p> <p>a. Intermezzo, b. Minuet, From I Pagliacci Leonecavallo The Orchestra.</p> <p>Part II.</p> <p>Phaudrig Crohoore—An Irish Ballad, Sir Charles Villiers Stanford. Chorus, with Bass Solo. The Choral Society and Mr. Witherspoon, with Orchestra.</p>	h w e t n d t i w a I c a tl tl F 3 tl m v tl w 6 f sc M
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This time, at last, we have a review, in the Geneva Daily Times of 25 May 1905, of the performance itself. A critic from Rochester was brought in for the job. He began by detailing, firmly but kindly, the various ways in which the chorus might improve their work. He found, however, that “Phaudrig” brought out the best in them.

... something should be said in recognition of the dramatic sense of the singers. They were “Phaudrig” worshippers one and all and never did they sing so well as when they proclaimed in solid harmony

*Oh! Phaudrig Crohoore was the broth of a boy,
An’ he stood six foot eight;
An’ his arm was as round as another man’s thigh –
’Tis Phaudrig was great!*

The women were never heard to better effect than when they sang of his achievements in sweethearting and the basses excelled themselves when they growled about the rivalry between Crohoore and O’Hanlon.

Regarding the orchestra, it appears things were not quite as promised. Only “forty odd men out of a total of sixty” of Mr. Dossenbach’s orchestra

were brought in, and “the absence of French horns and fagotti were keenly felt” – as well they might be, both here and in the Schubert. Witherspoon’s singing was much praised, but without reference to his part in “Phaudrig”.

Three years later, “Phaudrig” was announced in the Utica Sunday Tribune as the climax of a programme to be given by the Gaelic Choral Club. The year is 1908, the date of the article is not clear, but the concert was to be held on the eve of St. Patrick’s Day, 17 March.

The cantata is a poem by J. Sheridan Le Fanu, and the music was written by Charles Villiers Stanford. It will be presented by Dr. Frank P. Cavallo, baritone soloist, and a large chorus. ... The music is especially written to fit the plot and is of a lively character. Some fine effects are produced by the soprano and alto choruses.

Notices get shorter as the novelty wore off, but “Phaudrig” was back in Syracuse in 1909, when the Syracuse Journal of 17 April announced that it would close a programme to be given by the Irish Choral Society at the Wieting Opera House on 25 April. A solo singer, Robert Dawson, was listed. The real draw of the evening, though, may have been the items offered by the guest singer, tenor Joseph O’Mara, who had had a leading role in the London production of “Shamus O’Brien”, and even recorded one of his arias on a 1901 G&T. He sang nothing from “Shamus” in Syracuse, but several of the Irish airs he offered were in Stanford’s arrangements.

Same time, same place, same choral society. The Syracuse Post on an undecipherable date in 1910 announced a similarly constructed concert for 17 April. Robert Dawson was again the soloist and “full orchestral accompaniment” was promised. This was the latest date to show up on the “Postcards from Brooklyn” site. In conclusion, it can be said that “Phaudrig” had a good run in medium-small towns in the New York area. No performance in New York City itself emerged. One gets the impression that these were all urban areas where a goodly contingent of the population was of Irish origin. My information is necessarily limited to New York and its environs. It is possible that “Phaudrig” enjoyed similar success elsewhere in the United States, particularly where the Irish factor was strong.



WIETING OPERA HOUSE, SYRACUSE, NEW YORK.

What, though, was a bass soloist doing there? In truth, in all of Stanford’s solely choral ballads there are passages sung, as of the poem, by an individual, but given chorally – this goes for “The Revenge” and “The Battle of the Baltic” too. The temptation to “solo them out” is strong, however much a purist streak insists that we should do what Stanford intended. One of the advantages of these choral cantatas was supposed to be the cost saving resulting from having no soloists. On the other hand, if a choir has a sonorous soloist within its ranks, it could be very effective to allot him Phaudrig’s music.

Back in England, a broadcast under Boult might seem to have marked the official adoption of “Phaudrig” in the British choral canon, but it seems actually to represented the highest point in its progress. After the war, people found themselves in a different world, doing different things. “Phaudrig” was given on “Children’s Hour” of 23 February 1949, in a performance conducted by Frank Cantell. This might have been an imaginative way to create a new generation of Stanford lovers, but the children were mature adults before they heard it over the air again on **11 June 1974**. The **BBC Singers**, trained by **John Poole**, and the **BBC Concert Orchestra** were conducted by **Ashley Lawrence**. Worse was to come. The BBC Genome site only reaches 2009, but unless there have been recent developments, many of the children who pestered their parents in 1949 to know what “divil a matter how cross” means, have gone to their grave without any further opportunity to hear “Phaudrig”.

Of course, the BBC is not everything. Occasional outings by local choral societies still took place. When piano accompaniment alone was used – not an ideal solution but a reasonably effective one –



it would be difficult to trace such performances systematically. A trawl through internet shows up a few. I happen to know of one that took place in Folkestone, Kent, in the early 1980s. Larger second-hand dealers usually have a copy or two in stock, often bearing rehearsal markings and choral society rubber stamps, testifying to the work’s continued circulation until the mid-20th century. I have a copy which seems to relate to a performance in 1963. It reveals that a large and tonally clumsy cut was made towards the end (from 5 bars after letter Q to fourteen bars after U). I hope this was not a regular practice.

Fortunately, the Ashley Lawrence performance has circulated on members-only forums for some time and has now appeared on

YouTube. The source recording seems to be the same in either case, since both are very slightly under pitch. Not even so much as a quarter of a tone, but if you are able to correct this, the performance and recording sound just a little brighter. If you only know the YouTube version, you are missing a treat, since it omits the original announcement. The speaker, after announcing the work itself in normal BBC tones, then gives a presentation of the story – part direct quotation from the poem, part summary – in the most delicious Irish brogue. Some might find it camp, even politically incorrect. I enjoyed every minute of it, and I now know that “Phaudrig” is pronounced “Paadrig”.

Then the performance starts and the chorus have learnt their Irish in Cheltenham. Does this matter? Not quite as much as you might think. The Irish contralto Bernadette Greevy recorded a selection of Irish songs in later life, [reviewed here](#), in which she demonstrated that there is no need to exaggerate the local colour. A touch here, a touch there, will be quite enough. The BBC Singers do not indulge in any such touch at all, but it all goes with a swing. After all, the Royal Choral Society under Sir Malcolm Sargent did not sound like Red Indians when they sang “Hiawatha”, and nobody minded much. The comparison with Sargent is apposite, for Lawrence has a similar “let’s get on with it” approach, swinging it along nicely but with no dawdling over the finer details. I get the idea, when reading the reports of the American performances, that they may have entered more into the spirit of the thing. The BBC performance is lively, but not quite “rollicking”. It might not be easy to get more out of an English choir. At the other end of the scale, the epilogue flows along nicely, but the encomiums it inspired from the Daily News at the first performance imply that it struck a deeper note under Stanford’s own direction. But never mind. The Ashley Lawrence performance is all we have and its virtues outweigh its defects.

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