

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

7. Not-Quite-Concertos

Stanford's three numbered piano concertos and two numbered violin concertos are fairly expansive works even when, as with the First Piano Concerto, the content was kept deliberately light. The Clarinet Concerto, of 1902, showed him experimenting with the possibilities of a 20-minute piece for soloist and orchestra. In this case, he wrote a single movement that encapsulated the features of the traditional three movements.

The potentialities explored in the Clarinet Concerto were not immediately taken up by Stanford. In the meantime his production of symphonies ended in 1911 with the shortish Seventh and was replaced, as his preferred orchestral form, by a further four Irish Rhapsodies. From 1918 he produced a spate of new works for solo instrument(s) and orchestra. Only two of them were conventional concertos and, even of these, the Third Piano Concerto was formally unusual. These "not-quite-concertos" were *Ballata and Ballabile* op.160 for cello and orchestra, *An Irish Concertino* op.161 for violin, cello and orchestra and *Concert Piece* op.181 for organ, brass, drums and strings. Possibly the Variations op.180 for violin and orchestra, of which only a short score exists, belong here too.

***Ballata and Ballabile* op.160** for cello and orchestra was completed in full score on 5 January 1918. Stanford followed this with a version for cello and piano, dated 29 May 1918. In this reduced form, it was performed in the Wigmore Hall by Beatrice Harrison and Hamilton Harty on 3 May 1919. Frederick Hudson also notes the existence of a set of orchestral parts in Stanford's own hand, complete but with just two desks each of first and second violins and one each for the other strings. These were originally in the possession of the Harrison sisters. The implication is that an orchestral performance, if only a private run-through, was at least planned, but Hudson found no record of any such performance actually taking place. The first known orchestral performance is that recorded for the BBC by Raphael Wallfisch with the Ulster orchestra under Lionel Friend on 8 August 1988 and broadcast on 26 January 1990¹. Having worked myself at a performing edition of the cello and piano version I would point out one other mystery. The cello part has several bars missing, where Stanford jumped a line while copying. This is easily done, but, without inserting the missing bars, a performance would fall hopelessly apart at that point. The deduction is that this is not the score used for the Wigmore Hall performance, and indeed it contains no performance markings at all. Beatrice Harrison must have used another copy, now lost.

The first complete recording with orchestra was set down for Hyperion on 6-7 January 2011 by Gemma Rosefield and the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra under Andrew Manze. I have [reviewed](#) this for MWI. It was preceded by a recording of the *Ballata* only in the cello and piano version, by Alison Moncrieff Kelly and the undersigned, issued by Meridian in 2004. This was [reviewed](#) for MWI by Jonathan Woolf. Prior to making the recording, Gemma Rosefield gave at least one performance of the *Ballata* in the piano version – its inclusion in a recital with pianist Ashley Wass in the Hollywell Music Room, Oxford, on 20 September 2009 is announced in British Music Society News 123 (September 2009). The Wallfisch/Friend performance can be found on a members-only forum. Its availability, to those who know where to find it, fuels a question I already raised in my review.

The *Ballata and Ballabile* has been described as a cello concerto without a first movement – consisting of an expansive, Irish-sounding ballade and a lively dance which starts like a jig but also finds place for a

¹ Information from Frederick Hudson's unpublished catalogue of Stanford's works

polonaise. However, whether or not you view the *Ballata* as equivalent to a concerto slow movement depends on what you do with it. As I already explained when reviewing the Hyperion disc, this movement was originally marked *Allegretto* in the piano score – I have not seen the orchestral score. This was crossed out and replaced with *Andante con moto*. When preparing the Meridian recording, therefore, I expected to give a fairly flowing interpretation. At the first rehearsal, Alison set out at a tempo so much slower that I stopped and queried it. Alison replied that she had very strong feelings about this music and she begged me to hear it through once at this tempo, after which we would discuss it. She then gave a performance so intensely felt and deeply moving that I would not have changed a note. With a spot of tidying up, this is what went on the record. Our performance takes 12:11. While I would not have had it otherwise, I was aware that this was a personal slant on the music, not necessarily the way it should always be done and probably, in view of the tempo marking, not what Stanford had in mind, though the change from *Allegretto* to *Andante con moto* implies that he realized it had an expressive potential that would be lost if it flowed too easily. Whatever, Gemma Rosefield took a similar tempo, with just occasional tightening to make a timing of 10:48. Played this way, you have a concerto without a first movement.

Raphael Wallfisch, on the other hand, took the flowing tempo I had originally imagined. His timing is only 7:41. There is no sense of haste or superficiality, but the movement now combines the features of a broad first movement and a flowing andante. It seems to work either way, though I feel – as an interested party perhaps I should not say this – that Alison Moncrieff Kelly sustains the slow interpretation better than the more ruminative Gemma Rosefield.

The *Ballabile* is a rather puzzling piece, with its combination of straightforward tunes and far-fetched modulations. Gemma Rosefield gives a very delicate, balletic performance – supported by Manze with the lightest of touches. She gives it a perfumed, salon quality – a sort of Irish Chaminade. Her performance is timed at 8:25. Wallfisch is swifter (6:58) but above all bolder and more dashing, with a cheeky humour as the music swings into a polonaise. Again, both approaches seem to work. The bold, dashing and cheeky interpretation seems closer to the image we have of Stanford the man. On the other hand, he did mark the music *Allegro moderato*, so perhaps he would have preferred Rosefield after all.

The upshot is that Rosefield takes a total of 19:14 over a piece that Wallfisch despatches in 14:39. Even more remarkable is the fact that the music can take both approaches. Which makes it a pity that only one of the two should be easily and officially available.

An Irish Concertino op.161 for violin, cello and orchestra was completed on 22 January 1918. It was performed at the Wigmore Hall on 4 December 1918 by Margaret and Beatrice Harrison with Hamilton Harty playing Stanford's own piano reduction of the orchestral part. This same reduced version was played again, also at the Wigmore Hall, by Sybil Eaton and Felix Salmond with Harold Samuel on 6 March 1919. The orchestral version was finally heard on 22 April 1920 under Stanford himself, appearing for the last time with the Bournemouth Municipal Orchestra. The soloists were Rhoda Backhouse and Ivor James².

Stanford resolves the problem of writing a short 20-minute concerto, not by writing three brief movements, but with a set of variations and a finale. The variations incorporate a considerable range of tempi and mood, hinting at most of the gestures we would expect from two or three larger concerto movements. The finale is basically a reel, but relaxes its pace several times along the way. The Irish tone is unmistakable and the whole thing is varied and highly attractive.

² Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press 2002, p.450-451.

The only performance in recent times seems to have been given at a St. Patrick's Day (17 March) concert in 2000 by the Ulster Orchestra conducted by Thierry Fischer. The soloists were Fionnuala Hunt and Alexander Baillie, standing in at the last moment for an indisposed Aisling Drury-Byrne. The Irish Times (21 March 2000) reported that this was the first performance with orchestral accompaniment. As shown above, this was not so, but the books by Dibble and Rodmell (who also gives details of the Bournemouth performance) were not published till two years later, so ignorance of Stanford's 1920 premiere was far less reprehensible than it would be today.

A performance available on a members-only forum is stated to be conducted by Lionel Friend with the Ulster Orchestra and unknown soloists. According to the BBC Genome site, the only Stanford performances broadcast by Friend were of *Ballata and Ballabile* and the Overture and Ballet Music from *The Veiled Prophet*. Whereas the only entries for An Irish Concertino regard the Fischer performance, broadcast live and repeated on 13 June. I presume, therefore, that what I have heard is one of these broadcasts. The performance has plenty of commitment and is convincingly paced. If it is a little unkempt here and there, the last-minute replacement of the cellist makes this understandable, and Baillie certainly did wonders in so little time. What a pity the team was not invited to repeat it on disc.

The **Concert Piece for Organ, brass, drums and strings, op.181** was completed on 15 April 1921. Structurally, it follows the three-movements-in-one model of the Clarinet Concert, with an exposition and a much reworked recapitulation enclosing a slower section. Stanford handles his unusual combination of forces with consummate ease. This is all the more remarkable considering he never had the opportunity – so far as we know – to hear the result. He believed in the work enough to place it in the hands of a London literary agent, A.P. Watt & Son, with the hope of finding a publisher. The dismal reply came back in due course that eight publishers had rejected it and there seemed no “immediate prospect” of “effecting a sale”. The eight publishers concerned had all issued works by Stanford at one time or another and three of them – Novello, Stainer & Bell and Boosey – had issued a great many³.

The Concert Piece was finally heard in Belfast on 19 June 1990, played by Dame Gillian Weir and the Ulster orchestra conducted by Vernon Handley. The Chandos recording by these same forces is generically dated 5-6 November 1989 and 11-12 February 1990, sessions that also involved the seventh Symphony and Third Irish Rhapsody. The recording, in any case, preceded the first performance, and was issued in 1990. It was not heard again till 2 March 2012, when Jonathan Clinch played it at the same Durham Cathedral concert that saw the premiere of the Second Violin Concerto. It was performed in Cologne on 31 December 2016 by Richard Brasier and the Orchestra of Basilikamusik under Vincent Heitzer. Publication of the score was announced for 2017 by Dr.J.Butz of the Musikverlag in Bonn, though at the time of writing (April 2018) this publisher's website does not list it.

Since the Chandos recording is not exactly new, I had originally intended to make only passing reference to this work. However, there appears to be no review of it on MusicWeb, so I take the opportunity to fill the gap. I have often been critical of Handley as a Stanford conductor. It is therefore a pleasure to say that this is one piece that I really cannot imagine being done better. There is a fine current of conviction behind the performance. That said, this is a Stanford work that fails to inspire me to more than moderate enthusiasm. I always return hoping to find more in it and I must say my attention did not wander this time. On a higher note, I will end by quoting Michael Kennedy, who could often be lukewarm over Stanford, but who found here an “epic, heroic quality in this fine and noble music ... of the three works on this fascinating disc, this remarkable work is the most original”⁴.

³ Dibble, pp.451-2.

⁴ Gramophone, November 1990, p.990.

The **Variations, op.180** for violin and orchestra exist, as stated above, only in short score. However, an orchestration was made by Jeremy Dibble during 2017 and performed, with Tasmin Little as soloist, at a Stanford Society concert in November of that year. As I understand it, overtures are being made to recording companies, but with no definite results as yet. The effort taken to learn it by one of our leading violinists certainly deserves to be rewarded.

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