

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

6. Fairy Day

Fairy Day op.131 is subtitled **3 Idylls for female chorus and small orchestra**. The three numbers are “Fairy Dawn”, Fairy Noon” and “Fairy Night”. The date at the foot of the printed vocal score is December 1912, but both Dibble (p.467) and Rodmell (Appendix 1) tell us that the unpublished full score, in the Stanford Archive at Newcastle University, is dated 6 November 1912. Probably the vocal score, intended for publication, was completed in December. Stainer and Bell brought the work out in 1913. The three individual pieces were still available until at least 1972 but, as with many items still listed by Stainer and Bell around that time, withdrawn shortly afterwards. We may wonder if their continuing presence till that year reflected ongoing sales or unsold stock. The poems are by the Irish poet William Allingham (1824-1889). Stanford had met Allingham while visiting Tennyson at Freshwater and recalled him as “deft and delicate”¹.

The title page bears a dedication to the St. Cecilia Society of New York and its conductor Mr. Victor Harris. Dibble tells us that “The work was performed by the St. Cecilia Society in 1913 and was later taken up by Horatio Parker in Philadelphia”². Somewhat puzzlingly, in his List of Works³, Dibble describes them as “unperformed?” Rodmell, too⁴, (p.276), describes them as “dedicated to Victor Harris and the St. Cecilia Choir of New York but apparently unperformed by them”. For what it is worth, a few years ago I found a website called “Postcards from Brooklyn” (it seems to have disappeared since) which was a goldmine of newspaper pages from the New York area. Various references to Victor Harris and the St. Cecilia Society showed up and, independently, quite a few references to Stanford, who enjoyed a good reputation in New York in the early 20th century. No mention of Fairy Day was found. This does not entirely prove that none might emerge with further delving, but tends to reinforce the view that it was not performed. The usually informative Smith makes no reference to Fairy Day in the body of his thesis but does tell us, in an appendix⁵ (p.318), that the first of the three pieces, “Fairy Dawn”, was performed at Trinity College, London, on 25 March 1920. I also understand that Dibble, in an introductory talk to the 2011 broadcast of Fairy Day, for which he had edited the score, noted that the publisher’s score and parts bore no performance markings, suggesting that they had never been used. To this I would only add that, indefatigable copyist of his own works as he was, Stanford might have written out another score to send to Harris, maybe Parker too. Or alternatively, Harris and/or Parker might have been content to perform it with piano accompaniment. We should bear in mind that, since second hand copies of the vocal score do turn up, the work may indeed have chalked up a fair number of performances with piano, either as separate pieces or as a set, in end of term concerts at girls’ grammar schools and the like, throughout the inter-war years. Events of this kind leave little or no trace.

Dibble describes the pieces as “enchanted and delicately scored”⁶, and surely no one would part with him over that. The orchestration shows Stanford’s usual sleight of hand and I find that the

¹ Stanford: *Pages from an Unwritten Diary*, Edward Arnold 1914, p.282.

² Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press 2002, p.405.

³ Dibble, p.467.

⁴ Paul Rodmell: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate 2002, p.276.

⁵ 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.318.

⁶ Dibble, p.405.

themes, in a slightly Brahms-cum-operetta manner, have stayed with me over the years. If you like Gade's *The Fairy Spell*, you should enjoy this too. Only at one point, when the cor anglais strikes up a succulent melody in the second piece, will the "complete Stanfordian" have an impression of *dejà-vu*, since both the instrument and the incipit of the theme, though not the tonality, have been heard in the Sixth Symphony. Given Stanford's penchant for self-quotation, this may even be deliberate, but Stanford's self-quotations usually have a reason, and I have not grasped any here. A lovely moment, all the same.

The first and third pieces have a several interventions by a solo soprano, but a note in the score says that they "can be sung by a few picked voices, if preferred". This was done in the BBC performance under Howard Shelley, with the Ulster Youth Choir and the Ulster Orchestra (recorded 6 August 2010, broadcast 17 January 2011), and seems a reasonable solution if you do not have a good soloist in your choir. A solo voice would add extra colour if available. In any case, the performance conveys the spirit of the music admirably.

As a postscript to this, and more readily accessible, you can find the third piece, "Fairy Night", on YouTube, this time with a soprano soloist, but with a clunky upright piano for accompaniment. Information is rather short, but it is evidently an amateur video taken by someone in the audience at a concert in a small church in Stockholm. The soloist, Wilma Kvamme, looks to be in her late teens. The same channel has a few more performances from her, all very amateur videos in the sort of swimming acoustic that makes it difficult to judge what is really going on. Yet, if this young lady goes to the right teachers, we may hear more of her. She has a gorgeous voice and seems to be a natural performer, though I am not sure if she will ultimately be a soprano or a high mezzo in the von Otter line. Too soon to say. Anyway, here she soars through the music almost as if it were Richard Strauss at his most effusive and indeed, they all sound as if they absolutely love it. The upright piano accompaniment matters surprisingly little – the prelude to the first piece, if they sang all three at the concert, would surely have been more problematic – and the girls' choir sing well. It is all a bit more fulsome than you would expect from a typical English group, and all the better for it. I loved every minute though, given the poor acoustic, I doubt if I will return to it often. But give it a try, especially if you do not have access to the Shelley broadcast.

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