

**Stanfordian Thoughts**  
**A periodical series of reflections on recorded and unrecorded works by Stanford**  
by Christopher Howell  
**9. His Most Played Work**

Try naming a piece by Stanford that has been played in public more than 750 thousand times as of the end of last year, and is still going strong. You may wonder, first of all, as I certainly would myself, how many pieces by even Bach, Mozart or Beethoven have chalked up quite that much. You may then reflect that pieces like the B flat Te Deum, *Beati Quorum Via* and *The Blue Bird* have been sung in local communities throughout the English-speaking world and it would be quite impossible to estimate the number of performances involved, many of which have left no paper trail behind them. But 750 thousand? Well, if you think that possible, let me narrow the field. Try, now, naming a piece by Stanford that has been played in public more than 750 thousand times *in the same place*. As a further obstacle, the piece in question must not be present in the work lists of Hudson, Dibble or Rodmell.

Impossible, you will say.

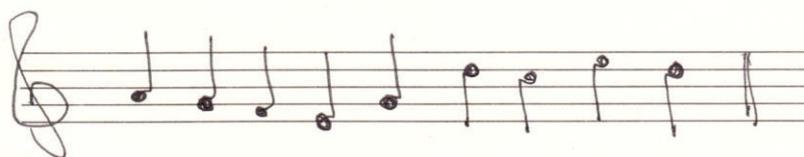
MusicWeb-International generally tries to avoid technical things like musical illustrations. However, many of my readers will be able to pick out single notes on a keyboard, so try this:



And this:



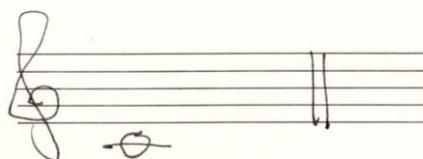
And this:



And even this:



If the last stretched your technique to breaking point, you can manage the next even without reading a score. Just find a middle C and play it from once to twelve times, according to the time of day:



As you must have guessed it by now, these are the quarter-hourly chimes of a church. If you come from a certain part of London, you might even have recognized which church – that of St. Mary-le-Bow. And, as all the world knows, if you were born within the sound of it, you can proudly call yourself a Cockney. But what has Dublin-born Stanford got to do with the Bow Bells? I have to confess this story came my way only recently and, strangely enough, I first encountered it in a New York newspaper, the *Holley Standard* of 7 December 1905. Although the sound of the Bow Bells barely reaches the other side of the Thames amidst the hubbub of present day London, its accompanying legend evidently crossed the Atlantic. I will let the newspaper tell its tale in full, including the charming, if blotchily reproduced, line-drawing that accompanied it:

*There is no church in London more familiar to Americans than Bow church. They will be pleased to learn that the rector has decided to have new chimes there which will ring out the melody that, according to tradition, bore to the despondent 'prentice boy, Dick Whittington, the message of hope that caused him to "turn again" and become lord mayor of London—thrice lord mayor of London according to the story. The setting of the tune for the purpose of the chime has been intrusted to Sir Charles Villiers Stanford, and the famous "Bow Bells" have been rehung by a firm whose predecessors cast the peal of 1669, which replaced those destroyed in the great fire.*

*As a matter of fact, the noble Dick never heard the bells that tradition has so firmly linked with his memory; he never was a bare-legged boy but the son of a knight and a well-to-do person; he was not thrice, but four times, lord mayor of London, he did not make his fortune by means of that wondrous pantomime cat that has amused so many generations of youngsters, and will amuse generations of them yet unborn. The only thing true in the legend is that there was a Dick Whittington, and that he married his master's daughter, Alice Fitzwarren.*

*The late Prof. Max Muller found the story of the fortune-making cat is Persian, which gives it an antiquity 1,000 years older than Whittington and it has been traced to Scandinavian folk-lore.*



A very complete account of the history of the Bow Bells was published – in English – by Charles Maclean in *Sammalbände der Internationalen Musikgesellschaft*, 7. Jargh., H. 3 of 1906. If you want technical details of the casting, manufacture and hanging of the bells down the centuries, and the firms responsible for it, you will find chapter and verse in Maclean. He also charts, with musical examples, the development of the chimes as the bells increased from six to seven, eight and finally twelve. For our present purposes, it is enough to know that, from 1881, the church had twelve bells but was using, for the quarter-hourly chimes, a clumsy variant of the old seven-bell chime. Maclean continues:

*The history and circumstances being thus, Sir Charles Stanford was asked last year to compose new quarter-chimes for the 12-bell ring at the church and has written the following; which, as will be seen, embrace some of the features of the old traditional 6-bell tune, but do not touch the refrain of the 7-bell tune. They do not use bell 6 or the note B.*

Maclean then gives the chimes in full, as I have reproduced them above. The *Holley Standard* is incorrect, therefore, in describing Stanford's work as only "the setting of the tune". He uses the brief first two quarters as of the old 6-bell tune, and repeats them at the beginning of the fourth quarter, but the rest is his own invention. We would not look for great individuality, let alone originality, in such a production as this – it may be an overestimation to suggest it cost him five minutes' work – yet, as Maclean pointed out, it, these chimes are unusual in avoiding the note B. This means that Stanford has given them a modal

tweak, with a personal, even Celtic touch. The Stanford chimes were first heard, Maclean tells us, on 18 October 1905.

What of their subsequent history? The church's own website includes an article by the former Steeplekeeper Mark Regan<sup>1</sup>. We learn there that the bells deteriorated and were declared unringable in 1926. Before entering their period of enforced silence, however, the BBC made a recording of them which was used on the World Service during the Second World War and is still sometimes used today. This recording is of the hand-rung bells ringing the changes, and does not include Stanford's chimes. In 1933 the bells were restored and recast. This was supposedly the gift of the American businessman H. Gordon Selfridge, creator of the famous store bearing his name, but there is apparently some doubt as to whether he paid for the work. The bells then rang till 11 May 1941 when a German air raid destroyed much of the church. The salvaged metal was kept and a Pathé newsreel film of 1956 documents the appeal by the Lord Mayor of London for funds to recast them from the salvaged metal. The appeal was evidently successful and another newsreel film relates the inauguration of the newly cast bell on 21 December 1961.

Are the quarterly chimes heard today still Stanford's? Regan tells us that

*Thwaites and Reedes installed the electric clock mechanism in 1961 and Smith of Derby replaced the chiming mechanism in 1985. Its capabilities have subsequently been extended, and regular maintenance undertaken, by the Cumbria Clock Company. The unusual tune used to strike the quarters and the hour was composed by Sir Charles Villiers Stanford in 1904.*

Recordings of the bells are usually concerned with hand-rung changes, but two recent YouTube recordings, evidently made by tourists, prove that the chimes for the third and fourth quarter are still Stanford's, as notated in Maclean's article.

In the context of Stanford's work list, this tiny note-sequence is more in the nature of a trivial pursuit than a real composition. Possible evidence that he dashed it off and then forgot about it – his Holland Street residence was safely out of earshot – is provided by the song "A Carol of Bells", written on Christmas Day 1915. Various London bells are referred to in the poem by Louis N. Parker, including those of Bow. Given Stanford's penchant for self-quotation, a snatch of his chimes might have been expected, but there is none.

Still, catalogues of composers' compositions are not in the business of making value judgements before including or excluding a work, so how did it escape Hudson, Dibble and Rodmell? Probably because musicology is musicology and campanology is campanology and never the twain shall meet. Articles about bells, such as Maclean's, not to speak of the church's current website, provide the necessary information. Nevertheless, I myself came upon the story accidentally while looking for something else. I daresay I am not alone among musicians in my indifference to campanology. I can think of nothing more boring than listening to twelve bells going through the changes for hours on end. Well no, actually I can think of more boring things. At least a hundred of them will have been written by Philip Glass. It is further evidence of the great divide between musicians and bell-ringers that the minimalist school has in patent good faith claimed, and been acclaimed for, originality when they are merely doing what bell-ringers have been doing for centuries. But that is another story.

Anyway, next time you go St. Mary-le-Bow way, try to be close under for the third and fourth quarter. Stop long enough to reflect that here you are at the hub of Cockney heartland, listening to the famous chimes conceived by Ireland's finest composer.

**Christopher Howell © 2019**

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.stmarylebow.org.uk/>