

### *Stanfordian Thoughts*

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

#### 12. To the soul. Did Stanford or Vaughan Williams get there first?

*Darest thou now O soul,  
Walk out with me toward the unknown region,  
Where neither ground is for the feet nor any path to follow?  
No map there, no guide,  
Nor voice sounding, nor touch of human hand,  
Nor face with blooming flesh, nor lips, nor eyes are in that land.  
I know it not O soul,  
Nor dost thou, all is a blank before us,  
All waits undream'd of in that region, that inaccessible land.  
Till when the ties loosen,  
All but the ties eternal, Time and Space,  
Nor darkness, gravitation, sense, nor any bounds bound us.  
Then we burst forth, we float,  
In Time and Space O soul, prepared for them,  
Equal, equipt at last, (O joy! O fruit of all!) them to fulfil O soul.*

Walt Whitman

Jeremy Dibble notes that the fourth of Stanford's *Songs of Faith* op.97, *To the Soul*, "utilizes the text made famous in Vaughan Williams's Song for Chorus and Orchestra, *Toward the Unknown Region*, commissioned by the Leeds Festival (under Stanford's aegis) in 1907, raising the question as to whether Stanford was prompted by Vaughan Williams's choice of text or whether it was purely coincidence"<sup>1</sup>.

It would be nice to say I have the answer to this question. Probably we shall never know, but here are the facts as we have them.

There is no doubt about the date of Stanford's setting – 28<sup>th</sup> June 1906<sup>2</sup>. It was not published until 1908, however, by which time the Vaughan Williams choral work had been performed. Stanford was supportive towards his ex-pupil, but would hardly have shown him his latest works in manuscript, or have informed him on his work in progress. So a Stanfordian influence on Vaughan Williams is ruled out, except in the generic sense that Stanford had made a notable setting of another Whitman text<sup>3</sup> in his *Elegiac Ode* op.21, back in 1884.

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<sup>1</sup> Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.364

<sup>2</sup> See Frederick Hudson: *A New Catalogue of the Works of Charles Villiers Stanford 1852-1924, Compiled from the Original Sources*, typescript 1994. Held in the Stanford Collection of Newcastle University and accessible here: [https://www.ncl.ac.uk/webtemplate/libraryassets/external/special-collections-guide/handlists/stanford\\_charles\\_villiers\\_archive.pdf](https://www.ncl.ac.uk/webtemplate/libraryassets/external/special-collections-guide/handlists/stanford_charles_villiers_archive.pdf). Retrieved 13.4.2022, L.15

<sup>3</sup> "Come lovely and soothing death", from section 14 of *When lilacs last in the dooryard bloom'd*.

The date of Vaughan Williams's work is more problematic. Various sources suggest anything from 1904 to 1907. The latter is surely too late. As Charles Edward McGuire has pointed out:

*For a virtually unknown composer (as Vaughan Williams was at this point), the offer of a première was provisional, based on whether the Committee and the festival conductor liked the completed work; fortunately for Vaughan Williams he had an ally at Leeds, as the festival conductor in both 1907 and 1910 was his old teacher from the RCM, Charles Villiers Stanford<sup>4</sup>.*

Ally of Vaughan Williams or not, Stanford, as conductor of the Leeds Festival, frequently had to fight with the Festival Secretary over programming<sup>5</sup>. Since planning for a triennial festival, such as that of Leeds, began immediately after the end of the previous festival, in this case 1904, it seems almost certain that Vaughan Williams would have submitted at least a short score of his new piece to Stanford and the Committee during the second part of 1906.

The suggestion of 1904 may derive from a letter by Vaughan Williams to Imogen Holst written around 1948:

*About 1904 or early 1905 Gustav and I were both stuck, so I suggested we should both set the same words in competition – suggesting “Darest thou” – the prize was awarded by us to me<sup>6</sup>.*

The Holst setting, H.72, was left in oblivion, though a recording is now available. Since the terms of the “competition” hardly seem to extend to a choral cantata, it has been suggested<sup>7</sup> that the Vaughan Williams setting in question is the much simpler one published as a unison song by Curwen in 1925. If so, it was magnanimous of Holst to concede victory, since his setting was considerably more ambitious, though not necessarily to its advantage. This short setting by Vaughan Williams is unrelated musically to the choral work. This “competition” is unlikely to have come to Stanford's ears.

It is known that Vaughan Williams set aside composition of *A Sea Symphony*, also using texts by Whitman and begun in 1903, in order to write *Toward the Unknown Region*. *A Sea Symphony* was then resumed and completed in time for the 1910 Leeds Festival. Is it fanciful to imagine that Stanford told Vaughan Williams, in the run-up to the 1907 Festival, there was no way he could convince the Committee to consider an hour-long choral symphony by an unknown composer, but stood a chance with a shorter piece? In which case, Stanford would have known that a Whitman-based choral symphony by Vaughan Williams was in the offing, and Vaughan Williams may also have told him that the shorter replacement would be Whitman-based too, whether or not he mentioned the text chosen<sup>8</sup>.

Vaughan Williams presumably knew that his former teacher had written a four-movement cantata, the *Elegiac Ode*, to a text by Whitman back in 1884, when he himself was a lad of twelve, but did he know the piece? As so often happened with festival commissions, Stanford's *Elegiac Ode* had a few

<sup>4</sup> Charles Edward McGuire: *Large choral works, and the British festival tradition*, in *The Cambridge Companion to Vaughan Williams*, ed. Alain Frogley and Aidan J. Thomson, Cambridge University Press, 2013, pp. 123-124.

<sup>5</sup> Harry Plunket Greene: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Edward Arnold & Co., 1935, chapter beginning on p.127.

<sup>6</sup> VWL 1766, <http://vaughanwilliams.uk/letter/vwl1766>, retrieved 18.6.2022.

<sup>7</sup> See for example note to VWL 1766 *ibid*.

<sup>8</sup> With very few exceptions, Stanford did not keep letters once he had replied to them. Paul Rodmell (*Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate, 2002), discusses this point in his preface, p.xix.

further outings at the time, reaching London in 1888<sup>9</sup>, and then fell from view. It turned up again, however, on 21<sup>st</sup> November 1900, when Stanford conducted a performance with the Leeds Philharmonic Chorus<sup>10</sup> and the Hallé Orchestra. Stanford was generally disinclined to reveal his inner workings to the public, but he vouchsafed some interesting information in the programme booklet for this performance:

*The idea of setting a portion of Walt Whitman's "Burial Hymn for President Lincoln" to music occurred to the composer in 1873 and assumed various forms until in 1881 the first chorus was written much as it stands now, and the two following numbers sketched. The work was finally completed in 1884 for the Norwich Festival of that year<sup>11</sup>.*

Whitman therefore seems to have been, for Stanford, something of a lifelong obsession, though one expressed only in a very few works<sup>12</sup>.

The 1900 performance apparently stimulated a minor spate of provincial performances, in Halifax (3<sup>rd</sup> March 1904), Middlesbrough (1904-5 season), Lincoln (28<sup>th</sup> November 1905) and Reading (24<sup>th</sup> April 1907)<sup>13</sup>. Since Vaughan Williams began work on *A Sea Symphony* in 1903, the really interesting question is whether he attended the 1900 performance, or was at least sufficiently curious to have looked at the score. If he did, he would have found a four-movement work with parts for solo soprano and baritone rather than a full quartet<sup>14</sup>, just as in *A Sea Symphony*. He would also have found, at the beginning of the last movement, a passage of pregnant stasis that foreshadows such moments in his own work. And he would have found, above all, a more youthful, ecstatic approach to death, closer to his own than the more stoic outlook expressed by the older Stanford in his own setting of *Darest thou*.

It is here that the two men part ways entirely. Where Vaughan Williams is ecstatic, even voluptuous, Stanford almost gropes his way, fearfully, towards the unknown region. His stride falters entirely at "all is a blank before us". He then gathers his forces to reach a climax that suggests stoic acceptance rather than passionate espousal. A somewhat original interpretation of Whitman, but one that makes Stanford's coupling, in op.97, of three Whitman songs with three by Tennyson more plausible than it might have been.

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<sup>9</sup> 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/>, retrieved 19.6.2022, p.289-290. The two subsequent performances Smith reports were by the Cambridge University Musical Society, on 13<sup>th</sup> March 1885, and by the Bach Choir, on 1<sup>st</sup> March 1888. Stanford himself was the musical director of both these institutions.

<sup>10</sup> Another institution of which Stanford himself was the conductor.

<sup>11</sup> Information about the 1900 performance is from Stephen Town: *An Imperishable Heritage: British Choral Music from Parry to Dyson*, Ashgate 2012, p.104, note 19, where Town acknowledges the information as having been provided in an email to him by Jeremy Dibble. This performance is not mentioned in Smith, *ibid*.

<sup>12</sup> Effectively, only two, but in 1913 he recast *To the Soul and Joy, Shipmate, Joy* as a single-movement choral cantata and, having failed to obtain a performance for it at the 1915 Norfolk (Connecticut) Festival, orchestrated *To the Soul* and *Tears* for that Festival. Whitman therefore preoccupied him, off and on, for some 40 years.

<sup>13</sup> Information from Smith, *ibid*.

<sup>14</sup> Stanford's choice of these two soloists was very likely an act of homage to Brahms's *German Requiem*. One might suppose Vaughan Williams had little time for Brahms's work, but his report on a performance in Berlin under Joachim in 1897 shows that he had real admiration for it. *The Letters of Ralph Vaughan Williams 1895-1958* ed. Hugh Cobbe, OUP 2008, p.19.

There was a time when I wondered if Stanford was deliberately teaching Vaughan Williams a lesson, but given Stanford's construal of the poem, it is difficult to see how his setting could have been any different, whether he knew the Vaughan Williams piece or not. As I said at the beginning, we shall probably never know. My guess is that Stanford was aware Vaughan Williams was working on Whitman, but as yet had not seen the results. If one-upmanship was intended, he would logically have made a beeline for *Darest thou*. Instead, the first of the three Whitman songs to be completed, on 18<sup>th</sup> June 1906, was *Tears*.

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