

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

11. God and the Universe. Which version came first?

*Will my tiny spark of being wholly vanish in your deeps and heights?
Must my day be dark by reason, O ye Heav'ns, of your boundless nights,
Rush of suns, and roll of systems, and your fiery clash of meteorites?*

*“Spirit, nearing yon dark portal at the limit of thy human state,
Fear not thou the hidden purpose of that Power which alone is great,
Nor the myriad world, His shadow, nor the silent Opener of the Gate.”*

Tennyson, 1892

In the [eighth article in this series](#), dedicated to part- songs, I briefly mooted whether the SATB version of *God and the Universe*, generally supposed to be an arrangement of the second of the *Songs of Faith*, op.97, for voice and piano, might actually be the original version. At the time I was writing, two recordings of the choral piece existed, with some other performances available on YouTube, but the voice and piano version was accessible only to those able to read the score. In 2021, however, the first complete recording of this cycle was issued by Somm and was reviewed here by [John Quinn](#). A second complete recording will shortly be issued, sung by mezzo-soprano Elisabetta Paglia and accompanied by the undersigned. I touch again on this question in my booklet notes, but space did not allow a full discussion. So I should like to set down my thoughts in more detail here.

All books of reference state that the choral version is an arrangement of the second song of the op.97 cycle¹. In the face of such unanimity, is there any case for arguing that the choral work was actually the first to be composed?

In the first place, it must be said that dated manuscripts survive for all the songs of the voice and piano cycle², but not for the choral song, so ultimately I cannot prove anything, only weigh up probabilities. The arguments in favour of the choral version being the first can be summed up as follows:

1. When Stanford made an arrangement of an existing piece that had an opus number, he maintained the opus number for the arrangement. The choral *God and the Universe* was published without an opus number.

¹ 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. Retrieved 13.4.2022, L.15; Jeremy Dibble: *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, Oxford University Press, 2002, p.364; Paul Rodmell: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate, 2002, Appendix One; 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.319; Michael Pilkington: *English Solo Song, guides to the repertoire 5: Parry & Stanford*, Thames Publishing, 1997, p.81. Moreover, Jeremy Dibble's notes to the various recordings, of which the most recent is that for SOMM CD 0627, all state that the SATB version is an arrangement of the song for voice and piano.*

² Only the last page of no.6 is missing. All are listed in detail in Hudson, *ibid*.

2. The choral *God and the Universe* was published in 1906, the song cycle not until 1908. We know that the voice and piano version of *God and the Universe* was completed on 27th May 1906, so time was short, though not impossibly so, for a choral version to have been made of it and published within the year.
3. Certain features of the writing, especially in the first part of the song, point to a choral origin.

To start with the first point, the obvious, and quite well-known, example is *Heraclitus*, op.110 no.4. This was issued as the fourth of a set of part-songs for SATB³ in 1910 and in a version for voice and piano in 1918. The opus number is maintained for the song version.

But, you may say, *Songs of Faith* was finally completed with *Strong Son of God*, actually placed first, only on 19th December 1906. The choral *God and the Universe* must have existed well before that in order to have been published within 1906. Since the cycle as a whole was composed over a period of nearly seven months, at what stage did Stanford attach an opus number to it? Was the voice and piano *God and the Universe* an isolated, unattached song before it was drawn into the cycle?

We can get some idea from the following chronology of known completions⁴:

- 16th July 1905: Serenade op.95
- 15th March 1906: *Stabat Mater* op.96
- 27th May 1906: *God and the Universe*, piano version, eventually op.97 no.2
- 1st June 1906: orchestration of song *I think that we were children long ago* op.82 no.4
- 2nd June 1906: orchestration of song *O Flames of Passion* op.82 no.5
- 4th June 1906: orchestration of song *When in the solemn stillness of the night* op.82 no.3
- 18th June 1906: *Tears*, eventually op.97 no. 5
- 28th June 1906: *To the Soul*, eventually op.97 no.4
- September 1906: *Joy, Shipmate, Joy*, eventually op.97 no.6
- 30th September 1906: *Faith*, eventually op.97 no.3
- 10th October 1906: String Quartet no. 4 op.99, first movement
- 16th October 1906: String Quartet no. 4 op.99, second movement
- 20th October 1906: String Quartet no. 4 op.99, third movement
- 30th October 1906: String Quartet no. 4 op.99, fourth movement
- 19th December 1906: *Strong Son of God*, op.97 no.1
- 10th February 1907: Wellington Ode op.100

Also to be slotted in are three two-part songs with piano, *The Lark's Grave*, *A March Landscape* and *This is the Way*, and the *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis on Gregorian Tones* op.98. The former were published, without opus number, by Curwen in 1906. The MSS are missing, so we can only suppose they were written in 1905 or early 1906. A further four two-part songs, *Cradle Song*, *A Laughing Song*, *Robin Redbreast* and *The Echoing Green*, published by Curwen in 1907 without opus number, could also have been written in 1906.

³ Or, just possibly, for SSAA. I raise the question in the afore-mentioned article no.8 in this series whether the SSAA version, published in the same year, might not be the original one.

⁴ All dates taken from Hudson, *ibid.*, except for *Joy, Shipmate, Joy*, the last MS page of which is missing. The printed score has September 1906 at the foot of this last song. Presumably, the score bore this date and the publisher interpreted it as referring to the cycle as a whole.

The *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis on Gregorian Tones* op.98 was published in 1907 by Houghton. Hudson⁵ and Dibble⁶ say it was completed in 1907, but the MS is missing and they do not say why they believe it was composed in this year⁷. Rodmell⁸ suggests 1906. He does not state his authority either, but is likely to have made the reasonable assumption that op. 98 would have been composed between op.97 and op.99.

Whatever conclusion one wishes to draw about the completion date of op.98, it seems certain that, by the time Stanford turned to the new String Quartet op.99, op. 97 was already mapped out and catalogued in his mind, even if it was not entirely completed. As far as the original version of *God and the Universe* is concerned, though, all this can be interpreted either way. Opuses 97 and 98 were certainly allotted by early October 1906, when work began on op.99, but that leaves time for Stanford to have arranged the voice and piano piece for SATB, say in early June, after the three orchestrations, when it had not yet necessarily acquired an opus number. But, in favour of the SATB *God and the Universe* as the original version, there is also a substantial space from mid-March to late May when Stanford is not known to have composed anything, and another space the previous year between the completion of the Serenade and whenever he began work on the *Stabat Mater*.

Is my second point, namely that the choral *God and the Universe* was published in 1906, while the voice and piano version was published with the rest of the cycle in 1908, any more conclusive?

The argument hinges on the usual time-span between completion of a piece and its publication. The *Stabat Mater* was completed in March 1906 and published (in vocal score) in 1907. *Songs of Faith* was finally completed in December 1906 and published in 1908. These, you may say, are larger works. But the evidence of probability suggests that the *Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis on Gregorian Tones*, hardly a large-scale work, was written in mid-1906, and it was published in 1907. Undoubtedly, if the publishers had a good reason for rushing things, such as performance at a major choral festival resulting in the immediate sale of several hundred copies, a small choral work could appear in print within a month or so of its composition. No such pressing reason has emerged in this case. The score⁹ contains a dedication to the Windsor and Eton Madrigal Society¹⁰. The conductor of this was Stanford's great friend Sir Walter Parratt. Smith's thesis lists a number of reports on performances of other Stanford works by this choral body, but none of *God and the Universe*. We may even wonder if they ever sang it. A study of known completion dates of smaller pieces by Stanford and their publication dates, suggests that anything completed later than April was likely to appear in print the following year. Since the voice and piano *God and the Universe* was completed at the end of May 1906, the circumstantial evidence seems slightly weighted towards the choral version having been written a little earlier, or even the previous year.

So what about the internal evidence?

⁵ Ibid, section B5.

⁶ Ibid., p.468.

⁷ In truth, the copy in my possession is the Cathedral Music reprint. It has no composition date at the foot of the score. This does not prove that the original publication had none. But Hudson would surely have reported any such date.

⁸ Ibid., p.247.

⁹ I have used a modern edition available on ChoralWiki

[https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/God_and_the_Universe_\(Charles_Villiers_Stanford\)](https://www.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/God_and_the_Universe_(Charles_Villiers_Stanford)) (retrieved 16.6.2022) and have not seen the original Boosey publication. The ChoralWiki issue, edited by Robert Nottingham, does not reproduce the dedication.

¹⁰ Information from Hudson, *ibid.*, but Hudson's entry is cut off, in the scanned copy, at "Windsor and Eton Madrigal ...". So he may possibly have given further information. Hudson seems to have used foolscap paper, which has higher sheets than A4, with the result that, when he typed right to the bottom of the page, which was fortunately not often, his last line(s) went missing when the pages were scanned.

It must first be admitted that, in all cases where Stanford re-wrote a piece for another medium, he did so with such imaginative skill that the unsuspecting musician would be hard put to say which version came first. *Heraclitus* is an obvious example¹¹. In the case of *God and the Universe*, moreover, substantial portions, especially in the second part of the piece, have been recomposed entirely.

All the same, the evidence comes early on. The vocal entries at “in your deeps”, first the altos, then the tenor and basses, and lastly the sopranos, seem essentially conceived for a choral texture. That is not to say that this passage is ineffective on the piano, but the thought behind it seems to be choral. This phase climaxes, in the voice and piano version, with a harmonic suspension that adds considerably to the tension. Is not this the sort of thing that a composer might add to a later version, rather than remove from one?

In the next phrase, too, the gradually descending bass, reminiscent of that preceding the last section of *Beati quorum via* op.38 no.3¹², seems a fundamentally choral concept, though again, one cannot say it is actually unpianistic. Nevertheless, the piano’s two notes leading into “Rush of suns” seem to cry out for words. Following this, though, the situation is less clear, since the eight bars after “clash of meteorites” have been rethought. The choral version contrasts the chordal writing for the altos and tenors (the sopranos are silent) with the sinking line for the basses, while the voice and piano version has a declamatory line suited to a solo voice. It would be impossible, on internal evidence, to say which is derived from which.

This is basically the story for the rest of the piece. Whichever version came first, it has features that could not be literally transcribed to the other medium. From the change to a major key, the piano has an arpeggio accompaniment that carries the voice on a tide of emotion to the climax. If this was written first, there was obviously no way to reproduce it chorally. The choral piece depends on the inner movement of the voices and the tension conveyed by the harmonies. Supposing this was written first, it could in theory have been translated literally to the piano. But without the sustaining power of the voices, with the harmonies ideally rolling in a church acoustic, it would have fallen flat. The choral version has a piano transcription for practice purposes that proves this point.

The passage in bare octaves in the choral version, underpinning “at the limit of thy human state”, is an interesting feature. Such passages can be effective with a choir, as here, less so for voice and piano. Stanford, in fact, continues his arpeggio accompaniment in the song version. But, if the voice and piano version came first, would he have relinquished his rich harmonies so readily? I would suggest not, but nor can I rule out the possibility that he decided the simplest solution was also the best.

The final bars seem to suggest a choral origin – the piano’s three bare notes preceding “nor the silent opener” are so perfectly designed for the words.

The conclusion must be that both versions work magnificently on their own terms but, in the parts where one is a relatively literal transcription of the other, the concept seems choral. So here, too, the preponderance of evidence appears to favour the choral version as the original one.

None of this amounts to conclusive proof. Such proof would require one of the following:

1. Discovery of the manuscript of the choral piece. This is unlikely. One can dream of finding a cache of Stanford manuscripts, including the Piano Sonata, the unaccompanied Masses and the first and last

¹¹ Another interesting case is the recasting of the second movement of the first String Quintet op.85 as the Idyll op.121 no.2 for organ.

¹² P.7, l.2 of the Boosey score.

sets of part songs. But Hudson, and Dibble after him, have made exhaustive searches and the emergence of such a cache is improbable.

2. Evidence of a performance, probably by the dedicatees, the Windsor and Eton Madrigal Society, prior to 27th May 1906. Smith has conducted extensive general research into such records, without uncovering any reference to this particular piece.
3. Mention of the choral version in a dated letter, perhaps a covering letter written by Stanford when sending the score to Boosey. Rodmell tells us, in his preface, that he has “traced about 800 autograph letters ..., but this is only a small fraction of the conservative estimate of 28,000 letters which he probably wrote during his adult life”¹³. There is a vague possibility that the necessary information is contained in the 800 surviving letters. It has to be said, though, that Boosey and Hawkes sold their entire Stanford-related archives to the British Library. Logic suggests that, if they had not kept the manuscript score (apparently they did not), they would not have kept any accompanying letter either.

So there we are. I believe that the choral *God and the Universe* was the original version, a one-off without opus number that subsequently provided the seed from which *Songs of Faith* grew. I hope that those who feel my case is not proven, will at least admit that a case exists.

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¹³ Rodmell, *ibid.*, p.xix. In a footnote, he adds that a “more realistic estimate” is about 56,000.