Stanfordian Thoughts

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

17. The Irish Symphony – a Query and a Mystery

This article is not a full discussion of Stanford's Third – "Irish" – Symphony. I confine myself to two points. One is a query – should the first movement repeat be played? The other is the source of the apparent Brahms quotation in the third movement – a mystery to which I may just possibly have found a solution.

The first movement repeat
First the query. While both Vernon Handley[1] and David Lloyd-Jones[2] opted to play the first movement repeat in the Fourth Symphony, they both agreed to omit it in the Third. Likewise Norman Del Mar in his pioneering recording[3]. There is a fourth commercial recording that I have not heard, in which Leon Botstein conducts the American Symphony Orchestra[4]. His timing for this movement is shorter than Del Mar's and Lloyd-Jones's and almost a short as Handley's. I presume, therefore, that he does not include the repeat. I have heard live recordings by Sir James Galway, with the Pittsburgh Symphony orchestra (11 June 2004), and George Jackson, with the RTÉ National Symphony Orchestra (10 January 2020). These also omit the repeat. Does it matter?

One reaction might be that this is already a longish movement. In Galway's performance, which I find the most convincingly paced of all, it lasts 13:25. With the repeat, it would extend to 17:17 and the whole symphony would take 47:15. Del Mar's expansive reading, which remains for me the most convincing of the commercial recordings, takes 14:26. With the repeat it would take 18:23 and the whole symphony would last 50:04. Vernon Handley breezes through in 11:29. With the repeat, he would take 14:35 – almost exactly the same timing as Del Mar's without the repeat! I found this exhilarating when I first heard it, but subsequently became frustrated by Handley's refusal to allow Stanford's themes to blossom. Lloyd-Jones is brisk but allows flexibility. He takes 12:40 and would take 16:40 with the repeat. Jackson is almost identical in his timing to Galway, but does not hold the movement together quite so convincingly. So, you may be thinking, is it not long enough as it is? It is the longest of Stanford's symphonic first movements except that of the First Symphony and it is, moreover, a movement over which many listeners (not this one), while admiring the rest of the symphony, have reservations.

Perhaps, but there is a problem. Just after the exposition is over – bars 4 to 7 after the double bar if you have a score, somewhere between three minutes and three and a quarter, depending on which recording you have – the music becomes meditative and a phrase appears that may remind you of the slow movement of Dvořák's Seventh Symphony, consisting of three rising notes then a falling sixth. This is the germ from which the development grows. It is heard again towards the end – 12 to 15 bars after letter M if you have a score – and this time it sparks off the coda. How odd that Stanford should use as a structural lynchpin a theme not heard in the exposition at all. The answer is that it is heard in the exposition if the repeat is taken. The three rising notes are the tail end of the second theme, almost as if Stanford intends to quote the Derry Air but

[1] Apparently not reviewed by MWI. Information can be found here: https://www.amazon.com/Stanford-Symphony-No-3-Irish/dp/B000025S1Z. Retrieved 30.8.2022.

[2] See MWI reviews by John Quinn and myself, in which I address the same two points as in this article. However, in the light of further information which has come my way in the meantime, I would ask readers to consider my comments there as superceded.

[3] A reissue is briefly discussed on MWI by Rob Barnett.

[4] Information about it can be found here: https://www.amazon.com/Stanford-Symphony-No-Minor-Irish/dp/B003TZDSXY. Retrieved 30.8.2022.

then decides not to. The falling sixth makes for the transition back to the repeat. So, if the repeat is played, this "Dvořák" motive is heard three times, setting in motion the exposition repeat, the development and the coda. Logic would seem to require that it should be played. Whether logic or patience win out presumably depends on how much the conductor loves the movement – and on how much time he has available. Lloyd-Jones's coupling of Symphonies 3 and 6 already exceeds the 80-minute mark, so if he had insisted on the repeat, he would have scuttled Naxos's idea of having two symphonies per disc.

The "Brahms" quotation
Now for the "Brahms Fourth" quotation, an issue that bedevilled this symphony from the beginning. Readers may have noted that there are quite extensive appendices to this article with musical quotations. It is not MWI's usual policy to include such quotations, since it is aimed at a public of general music lovers rather than musicologists. Let me assure the former that what follows is designed to make sense to the reader without the musical quotations, which are there for the musicologically minded to follow up if they wish.

Stanford felt impelled to provide a note in the published score, mentioning the use of two traditional Irish themes in the finale and, "In the third movement also a portion of an old Irish Lament known as 'The Lament of the Sons of Usnach' has been utilised as a figure of accompaniment". He then quotes this motive (see Appendix 1). In his autobiography, Stanford returns to the subject, expressing his gratitude to Hans von Bülow – the conductor of the first German performances – for drawing the attention of a Berlin critic to this note. He quotes the motif here too (see Appendix 2), stating that it is "from an old Irish lament in Petrie's MSS". He also claims that the Irish Symphony and Brahms's Fourth were "written simultaneously"[5].

Mystification, conscious or unconscious, seems to be at work here. In the first place, Stanford quotes the theme in two different ways. In the note to the score, it is shown in diatonic form – that is, if you play it on the piano starting from C, you will play it all on white notes. This is how it is played in the Symphony on its first appearance and, with an important exception, for most of its other appearances. In *Pages*, he quotes it in Phrygian form, which means that, if you play it on the piano starting from E, you will play it all on white notes. This is how it appears in Brahms 4 and at one significant point in Stanford 3.

As for the claim that the two works were "written simultaneously", we must give Stanford the benefit of the doubt that this is how he remembered it. Unfortunately, while he apparently did not check his facts, plenty of other people have. The "Irish" Symphony is dated April 1887 at the foot of the published full score. The Brahms was written during the summers of 1884 and 1885. Brahms conducted the première performance with the Meiningen orchestra on 25 October 1885. Hans Richter gave a performance with the Vienna Philharmonic on 17 January 1886 and introduced it to London on 10 May 1886. Stanford, seemingly, was sufficiently sure of himself not to verify this easily found information. Deliberate mystification seems unlikely, since in that case he would have known that anyone armed with a score of the "Irish" and a diary of London concerts in 1886 could have belied him.

Thanks to Jeremy Dibble[6], we can be even more precise in our chronology:

Summer 1884: Brahms completed the first two movements of Symphony 4
Summer 1885: Brahms completed remaining two movements of Symphony 4
25 October 1885: Brahms conducted première of Symphony 4 with Meiningen orchestra
10 May 1886: Richter conducted first British performance of Brahms's Symphony 4

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[5] Stanford, Pages from an Unwritten Diary, Edward Arnold, 1914, p.262
[6] Jeremy Dibble, *Charles Villiers Stanford, Man and Musician*, OUP, 2002, pp. 182-4

May 1886: 2-piano score of Brahms's Symphony 4 published by Simrock[7]
5 June 1886: Stanford completed first movement of Symphony 3
October 1886: full score of Brahms's Symphony 4 published by Simrock
18 February 1887: Stanford completed second movement of Symphony 3
4 April 1887: Stanford completed third movement (the one with the "Brahms 4" quotation) of Symphony 3
30 April 1887: Stanford completed final movement of Symphony 3

Even if Stanford had been unable to attend Richter's London performance, and surely only hell or high water would have prevented him, by the time he wrote the third movement of his "Irish" Symphony the Brahms was available in score for perusal and for the purloining of any bits he particularly liked.

But what about the claim that the offending motif was an old Irish theme anyway? Frederick Hudson toys with the attractive possibility that Brahms himself may have got the theme from an Irish source, even through Stanford himself:

> *The facts, not previously deduced, suggest rather that Brahms may well have derived his theme directly through his friendship with Stanford. … Stanford published his collection* Songs of Old Ireland *in 1882* [and dedicated it to Brahms with his permission] *and Brahms completed the 1st and 2nd movements of his* 4th Symphony *in the summer of 1884. Brahms possessed the original edition of Thomas Moore's Irish Melodies, 1807-1834 … There can be no doubt that Brahms and Stanford maintained a close liaison in this field of common interest[8].*

This is all very well, but where are we to find this "Lament of the Sons of Usnach"? In the Petrie collection, which Stanford claims as the source? The sons of Usnach were actually in no position to lament anything, having all been killed[9], but the Petrie collection, edited by Stanford and published in 1902-1905, contains a tune called "The Lamentation of Deirdre for the Sons of Usnach" (see Appendix 3). Unfortunately, neither this, nor any other melody in Stanford's edition of the Petrie Collection, has any discernible resemblance to the "Brahms" motif.

Rodmell[10] suggests that Stanford actually meant *The Lament of Owen Roe O'Neill,* which appears in *Songs of Old Ireland* and would, therefore, have been known to Brahms. While I agree with Rodmell that this tune is less unlike the "Brahms" motif than any other either here or in Petrie, the resemblance regards the rhythm, not the actual notes, and seems tenuous (see Appendix 4. I have marked the motif in question in brackets). Furthermore, as Rodmell points out, *Owen Roe O'Neill* is not in Stanford's edition of Petrie[11].

Dibble[12] notes that "*The Lament of the Sons of Usnach* may in fact be connected with the 'Old Lament' at the end of 'Oh where's the slave' which appears as No. 62 in Stanford's *Moore's Melodies Restored*". This looks more plausible. The rhythm is right and the notes are right (in Phrygian form), though not in quite the right

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[7] Information on publication history from https://www.brahms-institut.de/index.php?cID=613, retrieved 30.8.2022
[8] 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-collectionsguide/handlists/stanford_charles_villiers_archive.pdf. Retrieved 13.4.2022, E.10-11.
[9] For a brief account, see here: https://www.britannica.com/topic/The-Tragic-Death-of-the-Sons-of-Usnech, retrieved 2.9.2022
[10] Paul Rodmell: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Ashgate, 2002, pp. 126-127
[11] In his note to *Songs of Old Ireland*, Stanford says that most of the melodies come from Petrie, but some come from Joyce or Bunting. However, I have not found *Roe O'Neill* in Joyce or Bunting either.
[12] Ibid., p. 184 footnote 124

order (see Appendix 5). And Brahms would have known it, but not in Stanford's revision, which was published in 1895. In the original *Moore's Melodies*, which Brahms knew, the notes are the same, in a different key, but the rhythm is in 4/4 rather than 3/4 (see Appendix 6). This makes it a little less likely as a source for Brahms, especially when Stevenson's harmonies do their best to negate the theme's possible modal roots. Stanford, on the other hand, may have known that the Moore version was "wrong" long before he published his revision in 1895, but how and when?

Oh where's the slave are Moore's words to a tune called *Down beside me*. It is not in Petrie but is included in Bunting, though without the lament at the end[13]. The lament is also to be found in Bunting, separately, as no. 3, entitled *The Goll -–An Irish cry sung by a single voice in praise of the deceased[14].* The idea of linking the two tunes was evidently Moore's. *The Goll* is in 3/4 and, except for the different harmonies and key, exactly as in Stanford's *Moore's Melodies Restored* (see Appendix 7). Bunting's piano volume, like Moore's Melodies, were staple diet in Dublin musical salons during Stanford's youth. So Stanford would have known from his boyhood that this tune was in 3/4 in Bunting and in 4/4 in Moore, and had probably been told that Bunting was reputed the more reliable collector.

The suspicion that we are on the right track increases when we leaf back and find that Bunting's no. 2 is a *Lamentation of Dierdre for the Sons of Usneach* that is completely different from the one in Petrie. The Bunting *Lament* does not resemble the "Brahms" motif melodically, but at least the rhythm is right (see Appendix 8). Furthermore, in the left hand, Bunting has a motif in the inner voice that seems as if it is starting an ostinato as in the "Irish" Symphony. Bunting does not develop this idea, but could an imaginative young boy in a Dublin drawing room have been struck by its potential – so much so that it bore fruit in his "Irish" Symphony many years later? The notion that this movement was born from childhood memories of Bunting finds further support when we see that no. 1 is "An ancient Prelude for the Harp". Not the same notes as the harp preluding that opens the Symphony movement, but very much the same idea (see Appendix 9).

The relationship between these three items in Bunting and the third movement of the "Irish" Symphony can perhaps give us an unusual glimpse into the way Stanford's creative mind worked.

Firstly, let us look at what he was not. He was not a musicologist and even his friend Harry Plunket Greene admitted, with regard to his restoration of *Moore's Melodies* and his work on the Petrie Collection, that he "was not the right type of man for this work … The first duty of an editor is to see that there are no mistakes of fact; criticism comes after"[15]. In the present case, he had evidently settled in his own mind that Brahms 4 and the "Irish" were written simultaneously and never checked the facts nor, apparently, imagined that anyone else would do so. He quoted the supposed *Lament of the Sons of Usnach* in diatonic form in 1887 and in Phrygian form in 1914 and was evidently unaware of the discrepancy. He misremembered the name of the *Lament* and thought it was in Petrie when it, or something like it, was in Bunting. Any musicologist would have checked all these points one by one, and in the process would probably have stultified any imaginative or creative urge he had inside him. Stanford, instead, embroidered his childhood memories and came up with one of the loveliest symphonic movements he ever penned.

In my MWI review, which I linked in footnote 2, I came to the conclusion that "much as I love Stanford, I think he did a dirty piece of backtracking, inventing an 'Irish lament' that never existed and claiming to his dying

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[13] *The Ancient Music of Ireland arranged for Pianoforte by Edward Bunting*, Hodges and Smith, Dublin, 1840. This was Bunting's third and most substantial publication. *Down beside me* is no. 38.

[14] Bunting gives it again, with extensive piano variations, as no. 81.

[15] Harry Plunket Greene: *Charles Villiers Stanford*, Edward Arnold 1935, p.167 and, in general, Chapter XI, pp. 160 et seq.

day that he'd used it in his 'Irish' Symphony". As has been seen, I now think I have identified the lament, so I have to repent. But not quite in sackcloth and ashes. I am still perturbed over the moment where, after a full bar's pause, the solo horn takes up the lament motif, this time in Phrygian form, exactly as in the opening of the Brahms slow movement (7 bars before letter W if you have a score, around the 10-minute mark according to the recording you have). This transformation of the motif to make it an exact replica of the Brahms, even down to the instrument used, seems to be stretching coincidence rather too far.

Let us try to think ourselves into the mind of a British musician in 1887. Today, Brahms 4 is a part of us. Hardly an orchestral season passes without a performance, it turns up on the radio unbidden, we all have records of it, probably several. Stanford had almost certainly heard the Richter London première. Had he had the chance to hear it again? The score had been published, but he was a busy man. Had he studied it? I have tried to discover the early performance history of this symphony in Great Britain. I presume the major orchestral societies followed Richter's lead and took it up once the score and parts were available. But I have no definite information. Dibble tells us that the rather long interval between completion of the first movement of the "Irish" and resumption of work on the second movement was because Stanford was under pressure to complete two choral commissions – *Carmen saeculare* and *Praise the Lord of Heaven*. This would seem to leave him with precious little time to attend any follow-up performances of the Brahms, especially if they were not even in London. Brahms 4 could not have been embedded in his consciousness as it is in ours. Is it possible that, while working on the symphony movement with the "Usnach" motif, he was beset with the thought, "I've heard that theme somewhere before … quite recently … on the horn … ah, it's in Brahms's new symphony!" And so, out of sheer cheek, he had the horn play the theme solo, exactly as in the Brahms, as though to say "listen, this is an Irish theme too!" What he did not expect, maybe, was that his new symphony would be taken up in Brahms territory – Hamburg, Berlin and Vienna – so promptly. His momentary cheekiness was beginning to look like confounded irreverence. So I think there was also a little backtracking, if not on the scale I had imagined before.

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Appendix 1: Note in full score

Note.

Two of the themes in this Symphony, viz: the melodies on pages 134 and 154 are Irish Folk-songs known respectively by the names of "Remember the glories of Brian the Brave," and "Let Erin remember the days of old." In the third movement also a portion of an old Irish Lament known as "The Lament of the Sons of Usnach" has been utilised as a figure of accompaniment pp.105 et seq.

C. V. S.

Appendix 2: *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* p. 262

whom he had never seen. The Irish Symphony and Brahms' E minor Symphony (No. 4) were written simultaneously. The slow movement of Brahms' work begins with a phrase which is note for note identical with a passage in the slow movement of mine. But the passage
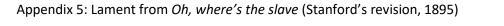
is from an old Irish lament in Petrie's MSS. In October, 1887, von Bülow wrote to Wolff the agent in Berlin "Brahms No. 4 E moll spukt ein klein wenig darin—doch ist die Reminiscenz im Adagio vom Componisten—im Vorwort—als eine nationale Melodie bezeichnet, *worauf O. E. aufmerksam zu machen wäre*" ("Brahms No. 4. E minor, haunts it a tiny bit—but the reminiscence in the Adagio is pointed out by the composer in the prefatory note as a National melody.— *O. E. ought to have his attention called to this*," the italics are mine). O. E. was Otto Eichberg, a prominent critic in the Berlin Press. Such was the

Appendix 3: *Lament for the Sons of Usnach* from the Petrie Collection

Appendix 4: from *Songs of Old Ireland* (supposed resemblance to "Brahms" theme marked in brackets)

LAMENT FOR OWEN ROE O'NEILL.

Appendix 5: Lament from *Oh, where's the slave* (Stanford's revision, 1895)

Appendix 6: Lament from *Oh, where's the slave* (Stevenson's arrangement, known to Brahms)

Appendix 7: The *Lament* as in Bunting:

Appendix 8: *Lament for the Sons of Usnach* from Bunting:

Appendix 9: Harp Prelude from Bunting: