

SIR WILLIAM STERNDALE BENNETT

(1816–1875)

There can only be very few personalities in the history of British music who were directly associated with a national renaissance in music. Such was the lot of William Sterndale Bennett who was born in Sheffield on 13 April, 1816. He was internationally respected as a composer in his own time – indeed a household name in England, pianist of the highest order, conductor of the leading orchestra, holder of the highest academic posts and yet today, although honoured in virtually every musical text book, his works are rarely performed.

Bennett came from a professional musical family. His father Robert was organist of Sheffield Parish Church and grandfather John a singer and oboist. Both his parents died by the time he was 4 years old so he was brought up by his godfather, William Sterndale, who was librettist of John's songs and a singer who had settled in Cambridge in 1792 as a lay clerk in the College Chapels. It was through his influence that Bennett became a chorister in King's College, Cambridge from the age of 7 at which time his talents as a pianist were noticed, despite his shyness – a characteristic which was to manifest itself throughout this life.

At the age of 9, on the suggestion of the Rev. S. B. Vince, Vice Provost of Cambridge, he became a resident, and by far the youngest, pupil at the Royal Academy of Music and among the first to be given free board and lodging. It was during his 10 years as a student at the Academy, being taught by Cipriani Potter, that Bennett's prodigious qualities were expressed. His style can be linked back to Bach and Scarlatti and he had a remarkable understanding of Mozart's operas. Most notable were his first three Piano Concertos, Symphonies and Overtures. It was in 1833 when he was soloist in his own first *Piano Concerto in D Minor* at the Hanover Square Rooms that Mendelssohn, 7 years his senior and already famous, was in the audience. He was so impressed he insisted on meeting Bennett and immediately invited him to Leipzig. "If I come, may I come to be your pupil?" "No", said Mendelssohn, "you must come to be my friend". So started a life-long friendship between the two men and many visits to Leipzig between 1836 and 1842. Mendelssohn stood him in high esteem noting "that he knew of no young composer in Germany of his years with equal gifts . . .", and ". . . I think him the most promising young musician I know, not only in England, but here also and I am convinced that if he does not become a very great musician, it will not be God's will, but his own . . . I have nothing to teach him, more often I am certain I can gain as much pleasure and profit from his society as he from mine". Indeed, he was treated as an artistic equal.

Admittedly, such praise was perhaps a characteristic sentimental overstatement of the times and contrasts with a later comment by Prof. Hadow who referred to Bennett as a 'pale shadow of Mendelssohn'. Be that as it may.

When Mendelssohn visited England he frequently stayed with Bennett and his wife (Mary Wood, daughter of Captain Wood, RN, whom he married in 1844) and influenced the first English productions of the *Scottish Symphony* and *Hymn of Praise*. During this period Bennett also became a friend of Robert Schumann who wrote well



Sterndale Bennett as a student at the RAM, aged 16.

of him in his musical paper *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* – a “thorough Englishman, a glorious artist and a beautiful poetic soul”. The most notable test in this respect came in January 1837 when his *Piano Concerto in C minor* was played at the Leipzig Gewandhaus. He received a rapturous reception from an audience noted for its criticism and creating a ‘composer’s graveyard’. Sixteen years later he was to be invited to become musical director of the Gewandhaus, but turned down the offer.

During this period his main preoccupation was composition, notably the Overtures *The Naiades*, *The Wood Nymphs*, various piano works, a *Chamber Trio*, a song cycle and a 4th *Piano Concerto in F minor*. He was unquestionably a composer endowed with a great facility of invention and neat, elegant craftsmanship. The trouble was that like most Victorian English musicians he allowed himself to be too strongly influenced by German models which all but suffocated whatever individuality he possessed.

There is no doubt the greater part of his creative output came before the age of 30, due to his devotion to the professional musical societies. Thus, a heavy teaching load began which took him frequently out of London. He also helped found Queen’s College in Harley Street, W1.

The (now Royal) Philharmonic Society was founded in 1813 and it was with that august body that Bennett made his debut in 1835. At the age of 25 he became one of its seven directors. There followed an association, also as a regular piano soloist and conductor, that was to last nearly 30 years. He played a leading part in preventing the



Sterndale Bennett at Leipzig in 1839.

Society ceasing to exist and in 1871 was the first recipient of its much coveted Gold medal. Yet during the centenary celebrations of his death in 1975, it was alone in ignoring the event. However, his work is well documented in "The Annals of the R.P.S." by Robert Elkin (Ryder & Co, 1946), a book which ought to be updated and reprinted.

Bennett's friendship with Mendelssohn was to play another important part in the musical life of England. Mendelssohn had 'rediscovered' some of Bach's Passion Music in 1829. Twenty years later Bennett produced a first English edition with translation by Helen Johnston. To do this, he founded the Bach Society, later to

become the now famous Bach Choir in London, currently directed by Sir David Willcocks. It is interesting to note that in those pioneering days it took five years to publicly produce the first English performance of the *St. Matthew Passion*. The public seriously needed educating away from their obsession with Handel and the performers found the music very difficult! Since then many editions of the Passion music have been published. Some years ago the late Eric Greene, one of the finest Evangelists, said he always used the WSB edition.

In 1856 Bennett who by then had gained an M.A., Doctorate in Music (Cantab) and Hon D.C.L. (Oxon) was elected Professor of Music at Cambridge University by a huge majority. Under his direction musicology and music degrees gained national acceptance. Incidentally, only eleven years afterwards did he get paid for his services there!

In 1866 he became Principal of the Royal Academy of Music until his death 11 years later. At that time such a post was regarded as that of a figurehead. However, standards had fallen, there were constant brickbats from the Press and the Directors even went so far as to pass a resolution that the institution be closed. Bennett would have none of this and successfully saved it. Among his distinguished pupils were Arthur Sullivan and Tobias Matthay. Indeed the R.A.M. owes much to his wise counsel. This is not infrequently displayed largely thanks to Sir Anthony Lewis, the present Principal.

But what of Bennett's later compositions? In 1852 he wrote a Piano duo for Piatti, the famous cellist. Then came the *May Queen*, a pastoral written for the 1858 Leeds Festival, in its time a popular work despite a dreadful libretto by Chorley. Much of this work was written at the Gilbert Arms Inn near Eastbourne, close to the site of the town library. A local artist was commissioned to paint the inn because of its association with the composer. Many notated prints exist but the original turned up this year through an enterprising Hampton art dealer who literally saved it from a junk yard!

In 1867, his *Symphony in G minor* was first performed with the Philharmonic Society in London at which the Prince of Wales was present. This work demonstrates a grander scale but somehow never really comes to the boil. Then his sacred cantata *The Woman of Samaria* became popular after its first performance at the 1867 Birmingham Festival. It is from this work that his best known piece, the quartet *God is a Spirit*, originates.

Bennett was knighted for his services to music in 1871 and died on 1 February 1875. He was buried in the North Choir Aisle at Westminster Abbey (the Poets' Corner) alongside Purcell and Croft, to be joined later by Vaughan Williams.

And so it can be seen that Sterndale Bennett, greatly revered in his lifetime, served music with distinction and was a pioneer during a period of mediocrity both in terms of playing standards and enlightened criticism. He then plummeted into relative obscurity. In a sense, he was the hope of English music and the tragedy of the Victorian Establishment, a child prodigy who was snuffed out by Victorian stuffiness.

Lovers of the arts everywhere are now engaged on an open minded re-appraisal of Victorian painting and architecture yet not so much with music. However, there is evidence that the best of Victorian composers is worth an airing and indeed some of Bennett's music is being heard again. He may not have been a composer of the first rank and indeed was only too well aware of his limitations, but was in the fore front of the second rank. He may not have directly influenced Elgar, Vaughan Williams, Maxwell Davies, Britten or Tippett, but was a vital link in the chain. The value of the

English musical renaissance, which is universally acknowledged, is wholly attributable to the Victorians.

A debt of gratitude goes to Professor Nicholas Temperley, the distinguished English Musicologist now at the University of Illinois, Urbana, for his research into Bennett's music and to Dr. Geoffrey Bush, the composer and lecturer, perhaps the most notable of Bennett's champions. Through him the BBC paid considerable tribute during the 1975 centenary. A spirited series of articles appeared in the *Sheffield Star* arguing that "the time had come to redress an injustice". This was followed by a full length programme on BBC Radio Sheffield.

It is of interest to note that succeeding generations have also been professionally engaged in music, notably James Robert, who wrote a charming, detailed and scholarly book on the life of his father (Cambridge Press 1907) which is still to be found in many second-hand bookshops and libraries. He was a Cambridge scholar, sometime Director of Music at Sherborne School, and Headmaster of Derby School. In 1976, Dr. Richard Kershaw, a Sherborne master of music, linked the S.B. connection there in a series of lectures/recitals. Of the next generation there was Robert, for many years Director of Music at Uppingham School, lecturer, examiner and broadcaster and his brother T.C. (Tom), the entertainer, singer and songwriter whose daughter, Joan, recently retired after nearly 40 years on the West End stage, notably at the Players Theatre. The family also possesses an extensive library which reflects a wide range of historical information of 19th Century English musical activities which is available for research through the British Music Society.

LIST OF PUBLISHED WORKS

- Piano Concerto No. 1 in D minor Op. 1* (1832)
- Capriccio for pianoforte Op. 2* (1834)
- Overture "Parisina" Op. 3* (1935)
- Piano Concerto No. 2 in E flat Op. 4* (1833)
- Sextet for pianoforte and strings in F sharp minor Op. 8* (1835)
- Piano Concerto No. 3 in C minor Op. 9* (1834)
- Three Musical Sketches, "Lake", "Milkstream" and "Fountain" Op. 10* (1835)
- Six Studies for pianoforte Op. 11* (1834)
- Three Impromptus for pianoforte Op. 12* (1836)
- Sonata for pianoforte in F minor Op. 13* (1837)
- Three Romances for pianoforte Op. 14* (1837)
- Overture "The Naiads" Op. 15* (1836)
- Fantasia for pianoforte in A major Op. 16* (1837)
- Three Diversions, duets for pianoforte Op. 17* (1838)
- Allegro Grazioso for pianoforte Op. 18* (1838)
- Piano Concerto No. 4 in F minor Op. 19* (1838)
- Overture "The Wood Nymphs" Op. 20* (1838)
- Caprice for pianoforte and orchestra in E major Op. 22* (1838)
- Six Songs Op. 23* (1834-1842)
- Suite de Pièces for pianoforte Op. 24* (1841)
- Rondo Piacevole for pianoforte Op. 25* (1842)
- Chamber Trio for pianoforte, violin and cello Op. 26* (1839)
- Scherzo for pianoforte Op. 27* (1845)

- Introduzione e pastorale for pianoforte Op. 28* (1846)
Two Characteristic Studies for pianoforte Op. 29 (1848)
Six Sacred Duets Op. 30 (1849)
Tema e Variazione for pianoforte Op. 31 (1850)
Sonata duo for piano and cello Op. 32 (1852)
Preludes and Lessons for pianoforte in all major and minor keys Op. 33 (1851–1853)
Rondeau "Pas Triste, Pas Gai" for pianoforte Op. 34 (1854)
Six Songs Op. 35 (1853–1855)
 "January", "February", for pianoforte *Op. 36* (1856)
Rondeau a la Polonaise for pianoforte Op. 37 (1855)
Toccatà for pianoforte Op. 38 (1854)
 "The May Queen", pastoral for soloists, chorus and orchestra *Op. 39* (1858)
Ode for Opening of Exhibition Op. 40 (1862)
Fantasia Overture "Paradise and the Peri" Op. 42 (1862)
Symphony in G minor Op. 43 (1864–1867)
 "The Woman of Samaria" – sacred cantata *Op. 44* (1867), includes the quartet *God is a Spirit*
Sonata "The Maid of Orleans" for pianoforte Op. 46 (1869–1873)
 Also: various anthems, sacred songs and motets.

DISCOGRAPHY

- January* from *Op. 36* – Alan Cuckston (pianoforte). RCA LHLL 5101
La Caprice from *Op. 33* – Frank Merrick (piano). SRRE 121
God is a Spirit from *Woman of Samaria* – St. Paul's Cathedral Choir; cond. J. Dykes Bower. VSD/CLP 3554
Six Songs Op. 23 and *Six Songs Op. 35* – Meryl Drower (Soprano), and Antony Brahms (Baritone), Gary Peacock (piano). Produced by Neville Irons. SRRE 105

NOTE

EMI have advised that it is their intention to record the *Piano Concerto No. 4 in F minor Op. 19* during the next year.

B.M.S-B.

