- COMMENTARY -

'You would pluck out the heart of my mystery': Discoveries and Paradoxes in Stanford-Related Research

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'Negotiating with De Valera', complained Lloyd George, himself no stranger to chicanery and mystification, 'is like trying to pick up mercury with a fork.' ('Dev' himself, on being informed of this complaint, serenely retorted: 'Why doesn't he use a spoon?')[1] A similar feeling of bafflement – a similar dread of wasted labour analogous to using a fork for picking up mercury – tends to overtake anyone who has spent the last four years, as I have, researching Sir Charles Villiers Stanford: more especially, in my case, Stanford's large and valuable output of organ music. When I began my research in the final year of my undergraduate degree at Melbourne's Monash University, I felt confident toward understanding the composer; and even when I started my doctoral thesis on the topic, my confidence had not yet waned. Now, as I await the adjudicators' report on my thesis, I am awed by my erstwhile hubris. It now seems to me that in a strange fashion, I now comprehend Stanford *less* than I did when I first studied him in 2017. All I can claim is that although my ignorance of him has increased, this ignorance of mine has become more productive and scholastically respectable.

No humblebragging operates here. In truth, Stanford will sooner or later baffle anyone who seriously researches his life and work; and the more one contemplates it, the more obvious the barriers to insight become. Hence my title's invocation of Hamlet's reproach (3.2.) to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern:

[1] M. J. MacManus, *Eamon de Valera: A Biography* (Dublin: Talbot Press, 1944), 130.

> You would pluck out the heart of my mystery. You would sound me from my lowest note to the top of my compass. And there is much music, excellent voice, in this little organ, yet cannot you make it speak? 'Sblood, do you think I am easier to be played on than a pipe?[2]

To Shakespeare's contemporary audiences, of course, the very phrase 'pluck out the heart' guaranteed an appalled shudder, since theatregoers in Elizabethan and Jacobean England had invariably heard of – and had often enough witnessed – St Edmund Campion and his fellow martyrs literally having their innards plucked out at Tyburn. But since only the most ruthless and self-centred musicologists have succeeded at inflicting similar damage upon their subjects, I am happy enough here to accept Hamlet's taunt as a mere simile.

The private Stanford remains, in a surprisingly large number of respects, much more inscrutable than the private Elgar and the private Parry. By now, various experts know as much about several contemporaries of Stanford as these contemporaries ever knew about themselves. Debussy, Dvořák, Fauré, Janáček, Mahler, Nielsen, Puccini, Saint-Saëns, Sibelius, Tchaikovsky, Richard Strauss: each of these masters now has a compendious bibliography; the letters of each have been conscientiously preserved and printed; with several of them, their doings for every month of their mature lives are accounted for. Even Elgar and Parry were voluble correspondents, Parry having also been a voluble diarist. Not so Stanford, who proved even less forthcoming about his inner motives than Ravel did. Stanford's 2002 biographer, Paul Rodmell, complains with justice:

> Many aspects of his [Stanford's] life remain shrouded – for example, the happiness of his marriage, and his relationships with and aspirations for his children. [...] Of Stanford's wider circle of friends, and of the nature of his relationships with them, similarly little is known. Also obscure are Stanford's recreational activities.[3]

[2] Shakespeare, *Hamlet* 3.2.349-354.
[3] Paul Rodmell, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002), 336.

Alas, the shortfalls in our knowledge do not end with the ones that Rodmell's list mentions. A particularly regrettable gap in our understanding of Stanford concerns his religious attitudes. He had in pronounced form a view that would actually become much more common in twentieth-century Britain than it ever was in his own time: the relegating of religion to 'subjects not talked about'. Parry, on the other hand, could scarcely stop talking about it: his diaries track his move from his boyhood's middle-of-the-road Anglicanism to an idiosyncratic blend of Social Gospel sympathies and passionate Darwinism, tinctured with metaphysics substantially closer to German idealism than to British pragmatism. Such faith-related inner struggles as Parry's abounded among intellectuals in nineteenth-century Britain, as the biographies of Tennyson, Thomas Hardy, Leslie Stephen, Edmund Gosse, and George Eliot demonstrate (the very word 'agnostic' had been coined in the 1860s by T. H. Huxley).

Stanford never allowed himself such an *apologia pro vita sua*. His 1914 autobiography recounted the confessional divisions of his Dublin youth; but even there, while willing enough to condemn Protestant and Catholic extremists, he said little about where his own church loyalties lay.

> [I]n spite of an antagonism which was only too naturally intensified by close contact, I was seldom if ever conscious of personal intolerance. It showed itself more in the markedly Low Church spirit of the Protestant inhabitants, who resented on principle an east-end organ and choir in their Parish Church, while they inwardly preferred a Cathedral service, when they could go there for relief. I remember a grotesque row, nearly destructive of close friendships, which was caused by a very sensible attempt to place the choir in our church (St Stephen's) near the organ at the East end. This heresy lasted only for one Sunday; there were shrieks of 'Puseyism', but the loudest protesters were to be found in the stalls of St Patrick's the same afternoon. The feeling, as I afterwards came to know, was accentuated by the Oxford Movement, which in Ireland resulted in a twofold secession, the one in the direction of Rome, the other in that of

> Plymouth. It had split families, my own amongst them, and it took years for the bitterness to die down.[4]

The sheer affluence of Stanford's Dublin nurture could well have helped inoculate that nurture against sectarianism of the type which twentieth-century Irish politics would make horridly familiar. But Stanford's reference to theological quarrels splitting Irish 'families, my own amongst them' indicates that sometimes the inoculation failed to work. Had Stanford lived long enough to encounter C. S. Lewis's *Mere Christianity* – published in 1952, though based upon 1940s radio broadcasts – the likelihood is that he would have subscribed to Lewis's eirenic teachings. (Lewis himself grew up in a Hibernian Protestant environment much harsher than Stanford's, one that drove Lewis into a decade of atheism.) Certainly Stanford never showed any desire to leave the Anglican Church, or to cease writing for it.

And yet, how many other Anglicans of Stanford's generation showed his own willingness, not once but on more than half a dozen occasions, to fit with music explicitly Catholic texts (the *Stabat Mater*, the Latin Requiem, the Ordinary of the Latin Mass) and to do so often enough in a style of almost Verdian flamboyance? The suspicion arises that Stanford – though never a secret Catholic after the manner of Byrd – might have been much fonder of Catholic ritual than it would have been good for any London-based Protestant of his era and social class (let alone for any London-based Protestant with an Irish accent) to acknowledge to others, or indeed to himself. Two unaccompanied SATB Mass settings, now lost, appear in Stanford's worklist as opuses 149 and 176 respectively; a third unaccompanied Mass setting, in eight parts, achieved performance during 1920 at Westminster Cathedral under Sir Richard Runciman Terry but has likewise gone missing in the interim. (At least Stanford's 1891–1892 *Mass in G,* opus 49, written for the Brompton Oratory, has come down to us and was issued on CD in 2014.)

Did the 'Scarlet Woman' – to quote an oft-used epithet by anti-Catholic Protestants of Stanford's day – offer to the composer the allure of forbidden fruit?

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[4] Stanford, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (London: Longmans, Green, 1914), 3. 'Puseyism' refers to the High Church doctrine of the Oxford Movement's Edward Bouverie Pusey, who (unlike the future Cardinals Newman and Manning) remained an Anglican all his life.

This much is incontestable: Stanford, not content with turning several times to Catholic liturgical words, followed attentively (far more attentively than most other Protestant musicians did, and probably more so than most other Catholic musicians) the musical mandates decreed by Pope St Pius X in 1903.

> The movement which started a short time ago at the Vatican for the better presentation of sixteenth-century music, for the revival and study of Palestrina and others of the polyphonic vocal school, and for the expunging of irrelevant and unsuitable music, came none too soon [...] The *Motu Proprio* decree has had its effect in this country in rousing a desire among the more serious and cultivated Church musicians and amateurs to bring back the masterpieces of the early English school [Byrd, Tallis, Tye, and suchlike composers] into our choir lists.[5]

Stanford nonetheless believed that the papally directed *épuration* had gone too far. As far as Teutonic Catholicism's musical practices were concerned, he proved to be an accurate prophet:

> The banning of Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven is a sorry proof of the danger of too much zeal. [...] I find it difficult to believe that the Hof-Kirche at Dresden and the Hofburg-Kapelle at Vienna will readily acquiesce in the abolition of their staple food.[6]

(Nor did they acquiesce in it. Emperor Franz Josef simply ignored the *Motu Proprio*'s dictates; and Pius X could hardly protest too strenuously against such imperial non-

[5] Stanford, *Pages*, 308, 310. The Protestant Stanford had a much greater esteem for the document than numerous Catholics felt. Readers of James Joyce's *Dubliners* are unlikely to forget the bitterness with which one female character, Aunt Kate, deplores to her niece the *Motu Proprio*'s banning of women (Kate's own sister included) from Catholic choirs. When the placatory niece invokes the honour of God, Kate retorts: 'I know all about the honour of God, Mary Jane, but I think it's not at all honourable for the pope to turn out the women out of the choirs that have slaved there all their lives and put little whippersnappers of boys over their heads. I suppose it is for the good of the Church if the pope does it. But it's not just, Mary Jane, and it's not right.' That the *Motu Proprio* rankled with Joyce himself – and that Aunt Kate might have been speaking for her creator – is implied by a passage in *Ulysses* where readers are told that Leopold Bloom 'yielded to none in his admiration of Rossini's *Stabat Mater*, a work simply abounding in immortal numbers', but also (as Joyce well knew) a work of the highest offensiveness to the likes of Pius X.

[6] Stanford, *Pages*, 309–310.

co-operation, since he would never have become pontiff in the first place but for the Emperor wielding his right of veto against a better-known cardinal at the 1903 conclave.)

Alongside Stanford's unexpected interest in musical aspects of the Roman rite went an equally unexpected periodic taste for setting the theologically heterodox verses of Walt Whitman and Algernon Charles Swinburne. Perhaps this choice of texts suggests genuine, if temporary, disbelief in the Christian creed. Yet once more, as with the issue of Stanford's possible Catholic sympathies, we simply do not know; and unless some primary source turns out to have survived the destruction of Stanford's private papers which took place sometime in the 1950s, the likelihood is that we never will know.[7]

Absent such discoveries, we are similarly compelled at present to do without any substantiation regarding Stanford's wider aesthetic motives. His hatred of Strauss – a hatred manifested not only in his First World War prose invective but in his laboriously parodistic *Ode to Discord* – always verged on the irrational and often attained it.[8] Teutonophobia forms an incomplete explanation. Stanford failed to single out for comparable insults any significant Austro-German contemporaries of Strauss, such as Schoenberg, Mahler, Humperdinck, Pfitzner, Franz Schmidt, Hugo

[7] At the risk of seeming ghoulish, we can also acknowledge possible significance in the fact that Stanford was cremated. Before a 1902 Act of Parliament, the legality of cremation in the United Kingdom remained unclear; and cremation itself had been associated in the public mind with atheism of a nastily eccentric sort. As late as 1919, when cremation followed the funeral of Bishop Edward Lee Hicks in 1919, the procedure remained unusual enough within Anglicanism to warrant substantial public notice. The Catholic Church explicitly forbade cremation in 1886 (before this, at least one Catholic prelate, Cardinal Vaughan, had been chairman of a cremation society in Manchester). Until 1963 the prohibition remained in force and was vigorously imposed, so that, for example, Catholics who had publicly expressed a wish to be cremated would be denied the last sacraments. Fifty-eight years after Catholicism ended the formal ban on cremation, it continues to discourage the practice. This footnote draws on Frances Knight, "Cremation and Christianity: English Anglican and Roman Catholic attitudes to cremation since 1885", *Mortality* 23, no. 4 (November 2018): 301–319, https://doi.org/10.1080/13576275.2017.1382460.

[8] Stanford in 1915: 'The essence of German militarism has been reliance upon numbers, rapidity of concentration, perfection of machinery, repression of individual initiative, and in action the attack in close formation of which this repression is the necessary corollary. In their recent music, all these elements can be traced. Richard Strauss is the counterpart of [Friedrich von] Bernhardi and the General Staff.' Stanford, "Music and the War", *Quarterly Review* 443 (1 April 1915): 397; Rodmell, *Stanford,* 289–290.

Wolf, and Eugen d'Albert (although Stanford did abhor Max Bruch, wrongly attributing Jewishness to him).

Did Stanford loathe Strauss precisely *because* he recognised, lurking deep within his own nature, certain Straussian traits? Both Stanford and Strauss showed the ability to conduct an ample range of music by other composers. Both men brought to the writing desk an exceptional aloofness of temperament ('the head which created *Tristan*', Strauss unexpectedly insisted, 'had to be cold as marble').[9] Both men desired financial reward, and shocked fastidious souls by the bluntness with which they avowed this desire.[10] Both men demonstrated marvellous fluency in managing to create splendid music, even amid employment timetables abounding in administrative and executant demands so varied – and so importunate – that they would have destroyed lesser men's compositional talents altogether.

On this subject, yet again, we lack more than fragmentary clues. We must see through a glass darkly, to the limited extent that we can see anything. But in contemplating Stanford's frantic willingness to exorcise the Straussian devil and all his works, let us recollect the Wagner-adoring, then Wagner-execrating, Nietzsche's caveat about the difficulty of differentiating obsessive hatred from obsessive love. 'He who fights against monsters', Nietzsche warned in the fourth chapter of *Beyond Good and Evil,* 'should be careful lest he thereby become a monster himself; and if you gaze too long into the abyss, the abyss will gaze into you.'

Self-evidently, Stanford, at some profound emotional level, found Strauss to be (as current usage or abusage has it) 'triggering'. Speaking to his young student Eugene Goossens, Stanford accused Strauss of having purveyed, in *Elektra,* 'pornographic rubbish'.[11] Nowhere – the observation bears stressing – did Stanford

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[9] "How Richard Strauss Gets His Inspiration", *The Étude* 32 (October 1914): 760.

[10] As recently as 2004 a Mahler biographer lamented: 'Richard Strauss was unabashedly interested in money. Notoriously, while visiting America for the premiere of the *Sinfonia Domestica* in Carnegie Hall, he conducted two afternoon concerts farther downtown, in Wanamaker's Department Store!' Stuart Feder, *Gustav Mahler: A Life in Crisis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 118. Readers are not told why these concerts should have incurred from Feder both the adverb 'notoriously' and the indignant exclamation mark.

[11] Eugene Goossens, *Overture and Beginners: A Musical Autobiography* (London: Methuen, 1951), 82.

employ such language about the more blatantly iconoclastic Schoenberg, whose *Five Orchestral Pieces* had already been heard by pre-1914 London audiences with varying degrees of fascinated horror. (From the bewildered Parry, the *Five Orchestral Pieces* occasioned a witticism which Vaughan Williams had the good sense to preserve for later ages: 'I can stand this fellow [Schoenberg] when he is loud; it is when he is soft he is so obscene'.)[12]

So much we can deduce from the printed record. To say anything more specific than that about the *fons et origo* of Stanford's anti-Strauss zeal would at the moment be nothing more valid than guesswork. And guesswork it will, for the foreseeable future, continue to be. The Stanfordian mystery's heart remains unplucked. It doubtless remains better so, given the obvious dangers of unbridled psychological speculation.

Increasing Stanford's elusiveness is the elusiveness of most other musicians who attained adulthood during Queen Victoria's reign. In 1989 Nicholas Temperley summed up with one piercing sentence the problem facing not only Stanford's admirers, but those who would win fair hearings for other nineteenth-century British composers as well: 'Serious Victorian music is a Lost Chord: the sound of it is out of our reach in a way that the sight and message of other Victorian art is not'.[13] Thirty-two years later, Temperley's complaint retains much of its original sad truth, especially as regards mainstream concert performance, quite apart from pandemic-related considerations.

Today, Victorian Britain's painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature are easily accessible on the internet. But Victorian Britain's symphonies, its concertos, its oratorios, and its operas – even its works for solo instruments and for chamber ensembles – continue to be a good deal harder to track down. When Temperley wrote, tracking them down was next to impossible. Happily, the explosion of repertoire which characterised CD releases during the 1990s has redounded to Stanford's great benefit.

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[12] David Manning, ed., *Vaughan Williams on Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 316.
[13] Nicholas Temperley, ed., *The Lost Chord: Essays on Victorian Music* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 14.

Anybody who wishes to predict Stanford's reputational future must admit that in several respects, the society where Stanford flourished is almost unimaginably distant from ours, not through chronology alone, but through considerations of the Zeitgeist as well. For one thing, these days the organ itself (which meant so much to Stanford) constitutes a side-issue as far as most music-lovers are concerned. The word 'ghetto' is uncomfortably pertinent. A mere two generations back, such organists as George Thalben-Ball, Marcel Dupré, Virgil Fox, and Pierre Cochereau could sell out every seat at their recitals. No organist nowadays can reliably do that; and, indeed, it is hard to think of any organist since the late Marie-Claire Alain whose name the average concertgoer of our epoch will recognise. Wholesale secularisation – which the recent flood of ecclesiastical sex scandals has intensified – must bear most of the culpability for this state of affairs.[14] Thalben-Ball, Dupré, Fox, and Cochereau profited from reserves of public goodwill towards (and familiarity with) the very sound of the organ, a sound much more difficult for the casual listener to become knowledgeable about decades afterwards. Pentecostal congregations – which in English-speaking lands are almost alone among Christian churches in having escaped demographic decline – are too fond of drums, electric guitars, microphone-brandishing solo vocalists, and suchlike appurtenances of 'praise music' to be amenable to anyone's organ-playing.[15]

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[14] Even in the USA, traditionally regarded as far more Christian than most of the Western world, the decline has been marked. 'Since 2009, the share of Americans who describe their religious identity as atheist, agnostic or "nothing in particular" has grown from 17% to 26%, while the share who describe themselves as Christians has declined from 77% to 65%.' Katherine Schaeffer, "U.S. has changed in key ways in the past decade, from tech use to demographics", Pew Research Center, 20 December 2019, accessed 2 February 2021, https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/12/20/key-ways-us-changed-in-past-decade/.

[15] Astonishingly little has been written about secularisation's impact on the organ world. One very recent and commendable, albeit necessarily Americocentric, analysis of the subject is Alexander Francis Meszler, *The Organ in 'A Secular Age': Secularization and the Organ in the United States* (DMA diss., Arizona State University, Tempe, 2020). Meszler spares no sensibilities in his blunt warnings:

> 'Though the exact number of organs affected [...] in the United States is unknown, based on data concerning lost congregations, a conservative estimate between 2000 and 2010 would be around 2,500 instruments. This number is an estimate, but if it is even remotely correct, this would constitute the most serious crisis the organ has ever faced in the United States. [...] Scholars, critics, organists, enthusiasts, as well as the editors of prominent magazines and journals have remained disturbingly silent about secularization, instead choosing to focus on specific denominational failings and such changing aesthetic tastes as the prevalence of praise music. The organ in the twenty-first century

Another factor which forms a gulf between our age and Stanford's is this: Stanford gained from cultural 'soft power' which he shared with most of his fellow Victorian-Edwardian-Georgian professors. During Stanford's time, and long after, few young people even finished secondary schooling. Any possessor of a university degree could thus boast, not least in Britain, a marked social prestige in the eyes of the majority not so favoured. As a result, British professors in Stanford's time enjoyed *ex officio* a vast public deference (of the sort which in parts of France, Germany, and Scandinavia might not altogether have expired even today). No such deference can be conceived in the twenty-first-century Anglosphere, amid an environment as litigious, as watchful of students' 'self-esteem', as oriented towards a mass-market ethos, and as dependent upon contract labour for tutoring, as much of tertiary education in the English-speaking world has become. Probably an academic with Stanford's record of verbal ferocity towards pupils – a ferocity which, it must be said, most of Stanford's own pupils tolerated – would nowadays be disqualified for any university job.

Are we to conclude, then, from these circumstances that Stanford can retain for us an exclusively historical noteworthiness, such as belongs to a quaint and amusing Victorian-Edwardian-Georgian relic? Should Stanford be patronisingly credited with (in that deadliest of pseudo-accolades) 'period interest'? Every sentence which I have here written attempts to answer this question with a resounding no. If it must be granted that certain aspects of Stanford's accomplishment belong to a civilisation which the First World War severely wounded, and which the combat for Irish independence killed off, it must also be granted that other aspects of his accomplishment continue to be germane to us: are at least as germane to us, actually, as they ever were to our forebears.

The *Irish Times*, in its obituary of Stanford on 31 March 1924, called the composer 'a musician for musicians'.[16] There are far worse fates than that of attaining a *succès d'estime*. In terms of populist appeal, Stanford could never, even

confronts an unprecedented crisis of purpose, heritage, and relevance. Without difficult discussions and negotiations, the organ's relevance in society will continue to wane.' (Meszler, 2–3.)

[16] "A Great Musician: Death of Sir Charles Villiers Stanford", *Irish Times*, 31 March 1924.

at the height of his European prominence, match Parry or Elgar. But populist appeal is not everything; moreover, the twenty-first-century Anglosphere has surely witnessed enough directly political populism at its most rampageous (and militantly anti-intellectual) to give even the most thorough-going artistic populists second thoughts. Stanford's style inclined to reticence, it habitually eschewed the extremes of emotion, and as a result, it avoided the perils of demagogic fervour. Possibly on this account alone, it possesses in our time a potential value as balm to frayed nerves, a balm which earlier decades were apt to underrate.

Stanford's own aesthetic approach strove, in its essence, to reconcile rather than to divide. It aimed to amalgamate the indigenously vernacular with the symphonically multifaceted; to amalgamate conservatism with unobtrusive venturesomeness; and to amalgamate discretion with profound, if seldom overtly passionate, feeling. Some lines by T. S. Eliot – that most self-conscious of literary modernists – acquire, accordingly, considerable relevance in Stanford's case. (This relevance was entirely unintended by the poet, who even after converting to Anglicanism remained indifferent to the composer.) 'The historical sense', Eliot asserted in a paradox singularly applicable to Stanford's art,

> involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence [...]. Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality. But, of course, only those who have personality and emotions know what it means to want to escape from these things.[17]

One other admixture, arguably the most important of all, Stanford embodied: the admixture of the national with the supranational. Notwithstanding his passionate attachments to the land of his birth and the land of his adoption, he rejected provincialism. It was inevitable that he would do so. Stanford the champion of Brahms and Wagner; Stanford the Leipzig student; Stanford the beneficiary (pre-1914) of Teutonic plaudits: these factors made insularity impossible, as well as undesirable, for him. A remark by Constant Lambert bears citation:

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[17] T. S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent", *The Egoist* 6, no. 5 (December 1919): 73.

> The strength of the English tradition in art is that it has always been open to fruitful foreign influences, which have been grafted onto the native plant without causing it to wither away.[18]

Critic Sydney Grew, who unlike Lambert regarded Stanford with consistent reverence, wrote in a similar vein:

> [H]owever intensely powerful your nationality, it cramps and confines you unless poured into the larger realities of the universal world of humanity.[19]

Grew's observation appeared in 1922. Perhaps for today's Britain – not least for a British musical culture now reeling under the unmistakable global blows of COVID, and under the less obvious psychic blows of Brexit – Grew's sentence can serve as Stanford's epitaph.

Melbourne-based organist and musicologist Robert James Stove was awarded a PhD by the Sydney Conservatorium in December 2021; his thesis is titled An Irishman Abroad: Nationalist and Cosmopolitan Cross-Currents in Stanford's Organ Music. *He is also author of* César Franck: His Life and Times *(Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2012), and has released three CDs of his organ-playing, the second of which* (Pax Britannica, 2019) *contains music by Stanford. The present article is based on a talk given to the Musicological Society of Australia's 2021 conference at the University of New South Wales.*

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[18] Constant Lambert, *Music Ho!: A Study of Music in Decline,* 2nd ed. (Harmondsworth: Pelican Books, 1948), 124.

[19] Sydney Grew, *Our Favourite Musicians: From Stanford to Holbrooke* (Edinburgh: T. N. Foulis, 1922), 44.

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