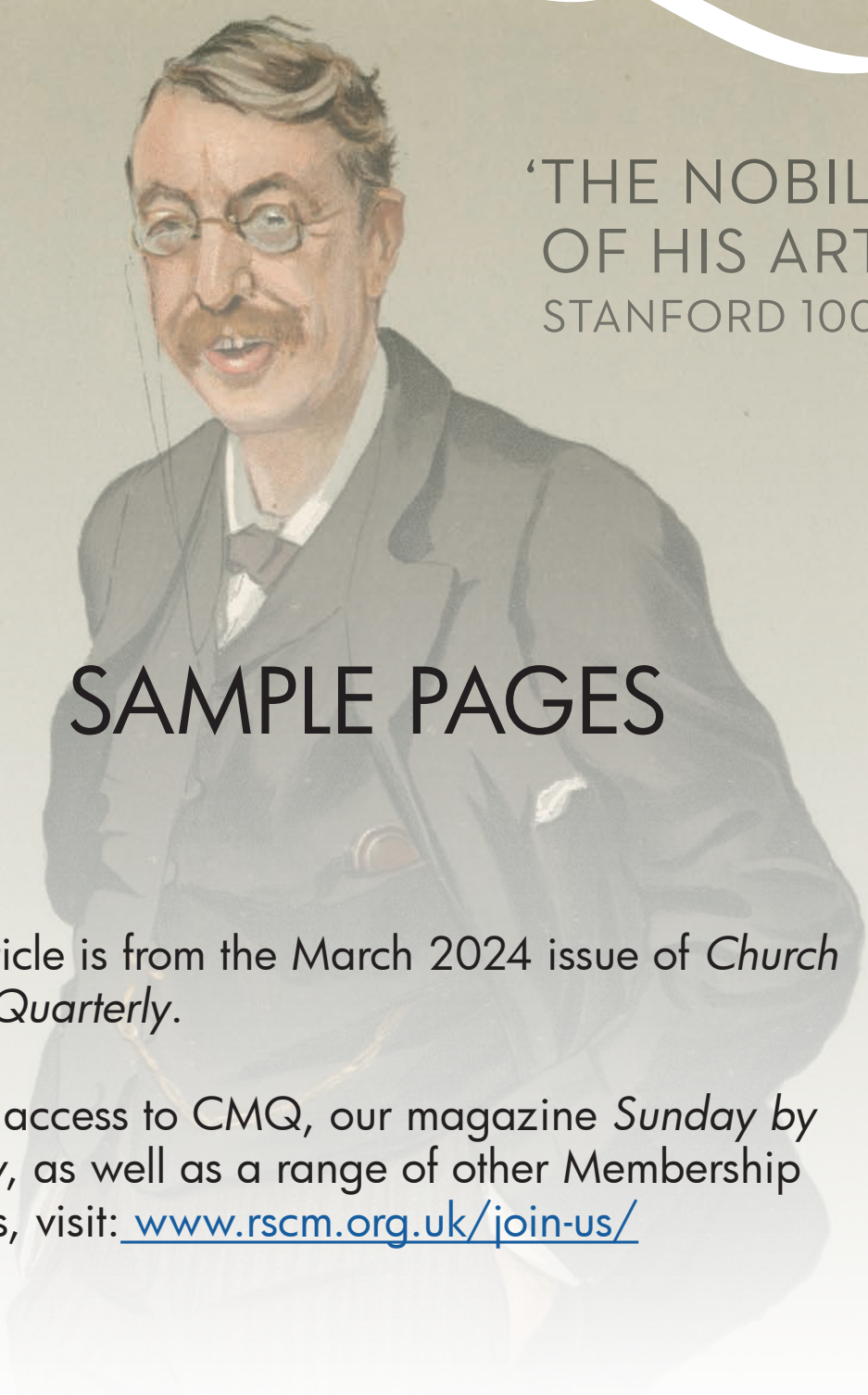


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'THE NOBILITY  
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## SAMPLE PAGES

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# THE PIONEERING MODERNISM OF STANFORD'S CANTICLE SETTINGS

JEREMY DIBBLE

Stanford is the only composer of front rank to compose Services since Gibbons....  
[His] Services are by far the greatest modern contributions to the repertory.

EDWARD BAIRSTOW, 1935



From the pages of his paper 'Music in Cathedral and Church Choirs', delivered at the Church Congress in London in 1899, and his autobiography, *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* of 1914, we know that Charles Stanford (1852–1924) held strong views about church music, its composition and its performance. 'She [the Church] should uncompromisingly adopt what is best,' he contended, 'irrespective of popularity, and eschew the second-rate, even if it is momentarily attractive.'<sup>1</sup> Characteristically unperturbed by the prospect of controversy or offence, he was equally outspoken about the role of the organist as 'the only representative of thoroughly trained knowledge of the subject' who was in a position to determine the choice of music. As Stanford unequivocally put it:

Formerly the monk was a more learned and cultivated musician than his servant, the organist or choir-trainer. He therefore rightly dictated the choice of music, of which he was a master. The

<sup>1</sup> C.V. Stanford, 'Music in Cathedral and Church Choirs', *Studies and Memories* (1908), 61.

Left: Charles Villiers Stanford, taken from the frontispiece to *Pages from an Unwritten Diary* (1914).

positions are now reversed. The organist is the learned and cultivated musician, and the clerical official has not (save in a very few instances) qualified either by study or research for a task demanding exceptional musical skill and routine.<sup>2</sup>

What seems to have provoked Stanford to place his head above the parapet was his own experience as an organist at Trinity College, Cambridge, where the choice of music resided ultimately with the Chaplain and Precentor, Louis Borissow. Like many clerics of the time, Borissow disliked 16th- and a good deal of 17th-century English church music, and there was not much appetite for more contemporary English 19th-century repertoire either:

Cathedral music in England has a great history. We have to thank the cathedrals for keeping alive, in artistically dark times, much of the half-buried talent of this country. They were the nurseries of such men as Tallis, Byrd, Gibbons, Farrant, and, greatest of all, of Henry Purcell. The traditions of these men, and many more, are not lightly to be brushed aside. They represented not merely learning, but luminous fancy; their works were English to the backbone, solid in foundation; sometimes, perhaps, severe to a new acquaintance, but, once understood, always growing in sympathetic feeling, and constant in the affection they inspired. They have an atmosphere about them which affects every man, who, from his childhood, has known an English cathedral. In this respect they occupy the same position in the English Church that Heinrich Schütz and the Bachs did in the Lutheran, and Palestrina and his contemporaries in the Roman.<sup>3</sup>

Lamenting 'the elimination of the works of our old masters',<sup>4</sup> Stanford also deplored the dearth of appearances in the music lists of cathedrals and collegiate churches of S.S. Wesley (notably *Let us lift up our heart*, which he considered Wesley's finest work) and Walmisley (namely his 'best anthem' *If the Lord Himself*).<sup>5</sup> Stanford attributed this state of affairs to a lack of veneration for tradition, a lack of appreciation of the 'best' music, and a lack of 'sufficient mastery to be able to write a movement in form', the latter of which he felt had contributed to the 'shorter, more scrappy, and (apparently) more

easy method of setting the canticles or writing a short anthem.'<sup>6</sup>

Stanford was almost certainly aware of this set of circumstances when he began his career as an organist at Cambridge, and his determination to restore a new, more elevated craftsmanship, originality and intellectualism to the composition of church music could not be more unequivocally celebrated than by the appearance of his Morning, Communion and Evening Service in B flat Op. 10 in 1879. Somewhat tantalizingly, however, Stanford said little or nothing about the innovations of this complete service where, as Bairstow remarked, he was 'the first to solve the question of musical form as applied to the canticle'.<sup>7</sup> We know from Novello's published copy of the Service Op. 10 that, in the Te Deum, Credo and Gloria, he made use of Gregorian intonations, along with the Dresden Amen for the doxology's conclusion, but there is no mention of the groundbreaking symphonic processes, nor of the formal originalities, nor of the adoption of symphonic movement 'types' such as one finds in the Te Deum (effectively a first movement in design), the dance movement (the Magnificat, a lively scherzo) and slow movement (the more contemplative Nunc dimittis). Indeed, given the cyclic nature of thematic occurrences across the entire canvas of the service, it was surely Stanford's objective to have his service sung across the three choral services of Sunday worship (mattins, Communion and evensong), giving to rise to a form of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, thereby creating a sense of musical, liturgical and theological unanimity likely influenced by his experience of Wagner's music dramas, which, prior to the composition of the service, he had come to revere. This analytical evidence chimes with what Stanford referred to as the rigour of 'form' in his Church Congress paper. More than this, however, we also need to appreciate that this aspect of his approach to church music was also circumscribed by the imperative to produce self-contained canticle movements that were both short and structurally eloquent to accommodate the exigencies of the liturgy. As Bairstow commented, 'the limits of a church choir and organ must not be overstepped. Each number must be short and concise.'<sup>8</sup>

The symphonic dimension of the Service in B flat was repeated with even greater zeal in the Evening

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 65–6.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>7</sup> E. Bairstow, 'Church Music' in H. Plunket Greene, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (1935), 220.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 220.

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Service in A Op. 12, which, commissioned by John Stainer for the Festival of the Sons of the Clergy at St Paul's Cathedral in 1880, was originally conceived for choir and orchestra. Indeed, the presence of the orchestra seems to have encouraged Stanford to intensify his symphonic processes, essentially strengthening the *instrumental* component of his musical conception. The practice of 'continuous variation', whereby thematic recurrences are constantly subject to recomposition and transformation (gleaned from Brahms's orchestral and chamber works), is much in evidence in the Magnificat, a highly sophisticated ternary structure in which the opening motive (presented by the organ) provides the 'germ' for an abundant series of reconstituted presentations throughout the movement, including the eight-part Gloria. The Magnificat in A major has much in common with the buoyant spirit of the first movements of Brahms's two orchestral serenades Opp. 11 and 16 and looks forward to Stanford's own Serenade Op. 18, composed for the Birmingham Festival in 1882. The Nunc dimittis is also intrinsically instrumental in concept. Indeed, it is the orchestra that underpins the structure, its sonorous duet for cellos, with ever-changing restatements of the opening material, providing the thematic bedrock of the movement.

**Below:** Festival of the Corporation of Sons of the Clergy, the Service in St Paul's Cathedral. *The Illustrated London News*, May 1865. Stanford's Evening Service in A Op. 12 was commissioned for the 1880 Festival, also held at St Paul's.

Not long after the delivery of his Church Congress paper, Stanford composed his Morning, Communion and Evening Service in G Op. 81 (published in 1904).<sup>9</sup> By this time, he was a mature composer of no less than six operas, five symphonies, choral works (including two major oratorios), songs and chamber music in which his classical formal instincts served to temper his increasing attraction to freer two-dimensional forms (such as, for example, his Clarinet Concerto Op. 80), cyclic interrelationships and hybrid designs. The latter is especially evident in the well-known Magnificat and Nunc Dimittis where Stanford adroitly exploited the connection between the songs of Mary and Simeon and the lieder tradition. In the exquisite rondo structure of the Magnificat with its vivid image of the Virgin at the spinning wheel, it is the solo soprano – the exultant voice of Mary at the Annunciation – which is associated with each return of the tonic key (G major), while in the Nunc dimittis Simeon's song of thankfulness is delivered fittingly by a solo baritone, underpinned by a symphonic through-composed scheme based on a simple harmonic progression, vi – IV – V – I, which itself

<sup>9</sup> The Morning, Communion and Evening Service in F Op. 36 (1889), often regarded as the 'Cinderella' of his services, was not conceived on the same symphonic lines. Rather, it was intended as a tribute to the English church style of the Renaissance and the 17th century, an idiomatic objective reflected in the composer's instructions that the service may be performed a cappella as well as with organ accompaniment and in its contemporary interpretation of old techniques.



articulates the central sentiment of Simeon's revelation that he may 'depart in peace'. Equally skilful, furthermore, is the way Stanford incorporates the Gloria into the larger structure, for here, not only does he provide a further thematic reworking of the original Gloria and a moving valedictory statement ('world without end'), but the coda also furnishes a poignant recapitulation of the opening progression (slightly altered as vi – ii – V – I), this time in the form of the final Amen. This is stuff of genius.

The cyclic element of the Morning, Communion and Evening Service in C Op. 115 (1909) is by far the most concentrated of all the services. Indeed, the two principal thematic ideas are introduced in the Te Deum as a form of symphonic 'exposition' for the rest of the service, and a third idea, the fanfare-like Gloria, acts as a recurrent 'suffix' (which also includes a conspicuous reference to the opening idea of the Te Deum) for the Benedictus, Jubilate, Magnificat and Nunc dimittis (emulating the practice of the earlier services). Stanford's sense of formal control is perhaps at its most sophisticated in the Service Op. 115, one that can be felt not only in the strength of the thematic invention but also in the engrossing structural autonomy of individual movements such as the Te Deum, Benedictus and Magnificat. Indeed, the Magnificat, the most frequently performed of the three, is an extraordinary formal experiment that differs markedly from the schemata of the earlier three services. In keeping with the increasing fascination Stanford was showing for variation forms in his later instrumental works (his *Concert Variations upon an English Theme* Op. 71 and the two string quintets Opp. 85 and 86 being particularly enthralling examples, not to mention the final two movements of his Seventh Symphony Op. 124), the Magnificat is an intricate yet elusive configuration of a theme (made up of three sub-thematic components)

and three symphonically developed variations, an unlikely formal choice for such a well-established text. There are other subtleties besides. What seems like a traditional four-part homophonic setting, perhaps harking back to the canticles of Stainer, is in fact an innovative five-part texture in which the choir provide four upper voices to the bass of the organ; and a typical example of Stanford's legerdemain is the final *perfect* cadence before the Gloria ('for ever'), which shrewdly contrasts with the *plagal* cadences of the preceding theme and first two variations.

In his all-too-brief contribution to Harry Plunket Greene's 1935 biography of Stanford, Bairstow made the bold claim, even in the light of canticle settings by Charles Wood, Thomas Tertius Noble, John Ireland, and even the young Herbert Howells, that 'Stanford [was] the only composer of front rank to compose Services since Gibbons. ... The consequence is that Stanford's Services are by far the greatest modern contributions to the repertory.'<sup>10</sup> By then, Stanford's service music had become fully established in the repertory of cathedral and church choirs and has justifiably maintained its place ever since on the grounds of its immutable combination of practicality and originality, the memorability of its themes, the variety of its formal designs, and perhaps, above all, the novel sense of Romantic drama and emotion (elements which Stanford understood only too well as an aspiring composer of opera) which he was able to bring to the text. The ability to accommodate all these features into the short, concise edifices of his canticle settings, which Bairstow so aptly described, reveal the true hand of a master, a modernist and a composer committed to the very highest standards of Anglican church music.

<sup>10</sup> E. Bairstow, 'Church Music' in H. Plunket Greene, *Charles Villiers Stanford* (1935), 220.

The RSCM publishes a wide range of Stanford's anthems, organ works and services. Jeremy Dibble's editions of Stanford's Services in B flat, A, G, C and D (unison), as well as the newly published *The Stanford Responses*, can be obtained from the RSCM Press webshop [www.rscmshop.com](http://www.rscmshop.com). A substantial and previously unpublished choral work, *Song to the Soul*, will be published later this year. Jeremy's book, *Charles Villiers Stanford: Man and Musician*, a revised and expanded edition, will be published by Boydell & Brewer in April 2024 and will be available to buy from RSCM Music Direct.

