

**Arthur Sullivan – A Life of Divine Emollient.** By Ian Bradley. Spiritual Lives. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 202. 214 pp. \$40.00 hardcover.

Ian Bradley is a well-known author of texts related to hymnody, Arthur Sullivan, and nineteenth-century Britain. In analyzing the potentially spiritual and theological aspects of Sullivan he draws on the work of biographers including Benjamin Findon (*Sir Arthur Sullivan: His Life and Music*, 1904), Arthur Lawrence (*Sir Arthur Sullivan: Life Story, Letters and Reminiscences*, 1899), Benedict Taylor (*Arthur Sullivan: A Musical Reappraisal*, 2018), and Percy Young (*Sir Arthur Sullivan*, 1971). From a specifically musical perspective the texts of Jeremy Dibble (*John Stainer: A Life in Music*, 2007), Derek Scott (*The Singing Bourgeois: Songs of the Victorian Drawing Room*, 2001), and Nicholas Temperley (*Music in Britain: The Romantic Age 1800–1914*, 1988) are cited.

This book traces the life of Sullivan and raises questions about the religious influence that came from his parents, being a chorister in the Chapel Royal, the close association with George Grove, director of the Royal College of Music and a biblical scholar, and Sullivan's work as a church musician in his early years. Bradley views the early influence of Thomas Helmore, Master of the Choristers in the Chapel Royal, as critical. Helmore's *Manual of Plain Song* (1850) and the related experience of chanting are here considered important to Sullivan's development. Twice a year Sullivan was tested on his scriptural knowledge (28). Bradley argues that the influence of Helmore might have led to Sullivan's agility in word-setting (33) but Helmore's pointing does not always follow the "natural patterns of speech" (33) that might be hoped for and in some respects falls short of later exponents of this specific style.

A central challenge with assessing Sullivan is the long-held view that he was shunned by the establishment because he was extraordinarily successful. As Bradley notes, Sullivan was "no saint and was certainly no ascetic. He enjoyed life to the full and was an unashamed pleasure seeker". (198) Beyond the life-long generous side of his character, Sullivan's approach to the church largely demonstrates a passing rather than influential acquaintance, as Jacobs noted (7).

But why didn't Sullivan choose to write more sacred music? If Sullivan really did have an abiding preference for sacred music, where is the evidence? Where is the substantial contribution that could equal the success of *The Prodigal Son* (1869) which had performances in Worcester, Hereford, Edinburgh, Manchester, and Crystal Palace? As *The Prodigal Son* was composed in three weeks (81), surely Sullivan could have composed a vast number of sacred works in less time had he wanted to.

There is no question that Bradley finds Fuller Maitland's well-known criticisms (191) of Sullivan unfair and that the composer was left outside the orbit of the English Musical Renaissance associated with Hubert Parry and Charles Villiers Stanford for a variety of reasons. Central to this argument is the observation that Sullivan was disadvantaged because of snobbery. Parry had attended Eton and Oxford and Stanford had attended Cambridge. The publisher, William Boosey, noted that that Sullivan was not "serious enough to be admitted into their solemn ranks". (192). But from a musician's perspective this is a populist argument and the relative lack of the sacred side of Sullivan's output has bearing in this regard. Was that also because of snobbery or simply because there weren't enough works to consider alongside others who wrote more?

Despite his early work as an organist, a small number of anthems, and his editorship of *Church Hymns with Tunes* (1874), his contribution to the liturgical world was and is remembered for a small number of hymn tunes, the most famous of which, *St Gertrude*, sung to the words “Onward, Christian soldiers” remains popular. If snobbery is an argument, then it is no different to issues of taste that stem from the nature of the “right tune” that congregations associate with particular texts, the preference of some organists for one composer over another, the performing capabilities of various choirs, and the requests made by clergy. If Sullivan’s contribution to hymnody is to be explored more critically, then a comparison should be made with John Bacchus Dykes, Samuel Sebastian Wesley, and John Stainer. The first two had already developed a richer harmonic vocabulary in hymnody and, arguably, a far stronger command of prosody than Sullivan. For the late Victorian style, the sacred works of Stainer certainly surpass those of Sullivan in their use of text. Of the larger works of Sullivan, the *Boer War Te Deum* (1899) (184) presents a challenge to anyone who knows Parry’s earlier *Blest pair of sirens* (1887), parts of which seem eerily familiar. Whereas Sullivan captures the texts of W. S. Gilbert, there are moments in the *Te Deum* that sound muddled even if, as Taylor noted, it was “accessible to the wide public at which it [was] aimed”.

Bradley stops short of analyzing why Stanford in particular may have taken issue with Sullivan beyond a degree a rivalry and points to Findon’s comments about Sullivan’s “wisdom in taking subjects [for large-scale choral works] which, again, have general interest’ (179) to the public. However, both Sullivan and his detractors had to navigate public taste.

It is easy to point to Sullivan’s writing of the music for *The Tempest* for his graduation recital (1861) in Leipzig - which Mendelssohn’s brother attended (45) - and then other orchestral works that were well-received and note that, if only Sullivan had focused on “serious” music he could have been England’s greatest symphonist of the era. However, there is no evidence that could have transpired or been supported. Many English composers returned from the conservative orbit of the Leipzig Conservatorium during Sullivan’s time and modelled their writing on Mendelssohn (which can be easily heard in Sullivan and which he admired) and found little interest from English audiences in repertoire that sounded even slightly more harmonically advanced. In the early twentieth century, the first organ sonata of Basil Harwood (also a Leipzig student) was considered too severe on an organ recital program. Rather, there was an interest in entertainment first, celebrity (especially if it was foreign, as with Handel and Mendelssohn), and a reinforcement of national identity. Sullivan achieved all of those and it is this that might be his lasting legacy because the public embraced him as he also understood them. It is not snobbery that cast Sullivan aside but rather a parochialism that worked in tandem with a frustration to move English music beyond the mid-nineteenth century. In this sense, Bradley illuminates the role of Sullivan as an abiding source for good. The faults in contemporary perception about Sullivan’s music were only partially Sullivan’s making.

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